

Thunder and Frost

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Category: Thor

Genre: Hurt-Comfort, Romance

Language: English

Characters: Frigga, Loki, Odin, Thor

Pairings: Loki/Thor, Odin/Frigga

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2016-04-09 20:52:20

Updated: 2016-04-27 20:59:10

Packaged: 2016-04-27 21:03:40

Rating: M

Chapters: 9

Words: 30,279

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: Thor wanted only to get on with the job at hand, which was to paint and restore the old manor house. The problem was that Loki had other ideas, but worse still was how Loki seemed intent on making his life a misery and held so many secrets . . . secrets that could destroy them both. So why did Loki fascinate him? (AU)

1. Chapter 1

****Thunder and Frost****

****Chapter One****

"Ah, Thor! Guess who's been fired?"

Thor looked up from his work. There was a sharp beam of light from the open window, enough that it stung his eyes and forced him to shield them with his hand, and â€" as he looked over to Fandral â€" he sensed that was some joke going on that he wasn't privy about. The lounge was made impossibly cold, but Fandral simply leaned against the doorframe with a wide grin and tousled hair. He seemed carefree, despite the extra layers of clothing.

There was little to be done about the cold, lest they close all the doors and windows, but no one really fancied suffocating from the already overwhelming paint fumes. The newspaper and plastic sheets crackled in the breeze, which wasn't helped by Volstagg using one of them as a makeshift picnic blanket for his lunch break, and some of the nameless workers hadn't weighted down the sheets properly, so they flapped in the wind. Thor dropped his paintbrush down onto the half-rotten floorboard, as he stood up and cricked his neck.

"Aye? Who is that?"

The look that Sif shot Fandral, as she walked by, spoke a thousand

words. Fandral ignored her quite blatantly; he was dressed in an old shirt with torn jeans, which gave him a sort of look one often found on trashy romance novels, and the blonde hair only completed that image, especially as he grinned like a madman. Those blue eyes narrowed and locked onto Thor with a seeming childish glee, as he knew something that Thor did not. Hogun paused in his sawing across the room to listen in with some curiosity.

"A little birdie tells me it's you," said Fandral.

"You jest," muttered Thor.

"Not in the slightest." Fandral let out a soft laugh. "We got here early today; his lordship deigned to step down from his perch, wanted to make sure we working to schedule, but I guess he thought that _our_ being on time automatically made _you_ late. He said â€" and I quote â€" 'that oaf is meant to be painting the room red, not the town'. I think that was followed by: 'if he can't turn up on time, I don't want him here at all'."

"We did try and explain the situation," added Volstagg over his breakfast muffin. "There's no reasoning with a man that has no intent of listening, so we gave him the number of the 'manager' and thought we would let the inevitable play its course. You'll be fine."

Thor looked over to the spiral staircase. There was the faint noise of classical music from upstairs, along with a scent that was hard to define and yet somehow was clear despite the paint fumes, and he wondered if the owner was still upstairs. The noise from below was deafening, as various tradesmen from the Borson Building and Decorating worked to the best of their ability, and Thor wondered whether this man â€" hidden away in his ivory tower â€" knew the company would one day become Odinson. He drew in a deep breath.

There was a thinly veiled curse from one of the workmen; it sounded like some tiles had been dropped in the kitchen, while the shattering noise echoed about the house, and Thor wondered whether anyone was injured. A door slammed from upstairs. It was possible that the little Lord Fauntleroy was displeased that there wasn't a complete silence, and Thor â€" as he flexed his muscles and clenched his fists â€" wished he had taken a different job.

He kicked at the paint tray beside him, before he reached out and took a hammer from one of the many worktables scattered about the room. It was a force of habit; the feeling of the wooden handle in hand grounded him, as well as would give him an excuse for being in most areas of the house not off-limits, because no one dared question the boss' son who was clearly attempting some carpentry work. There was also the added bonus of appearing more intimidating, which was likely why Hogun swept by and took it from his hand.

"No threatening people," warned Hogun.

"I had no intent of threatening anyone, my friend."

"You're eyeing the staircase," added Sif. "Do you realise how difficult it is for a woman to be taken seriously in construction, Thor? There is still an expectation it is somehow my duty to 'control' you and make you focus, and if we lose this job then people

will look to me and think I have somehow failed a duty that was never mind to start. Leave it be."

"You are mistaken, if you think I will take this insult." Thor gave her a sharp look. "This is my father's business. I am manager here. There is no way that I will let some self-entitled child remove me from my work, not least when I have done no wrong!"

"Maybe it's a cultural quirk," interrupted Volstagg nervously. "All instructions have been passed between Odin Borson and this boy's mother, correct? He's barely been in the country less than a week, so maybe there's a language barrier we're not noticing, and I bet it'll all resolve itself with a few patient conversations. If you go up there with guns blazing, we could all be out of a job by noon. Your father would be less than impressed."

"You think it a language barrier? He knew enough to fire me!"

"I'm just saying it's better to give the benefit of the doubt."

"Aye? Well, I have not the patience for that."

Thor made his way over to the staircase. It spiralled around and acted as the focal point to the living room; he recalled his father's warning to leave the highly decorated handrail in place, as the building was listed and legality required it to stay, but no one dared touch it in any case. It was far too beautiful, with the spokes clearly from some other time. The bottom step squeaked as he placed his weight upon it, and soon he ascended to the rooms above.

The upper floors were nothing like the ones below; they were personalised and very close to completion, with only the odd piece of skirting board or door frame in need of repair, and Thor " as he walked slowly through the second-floor corridor " looked carefully to the photos framed upon the walls. They seemed exclusively to feature a beautiful woman with hair so blonde that it was almost white, along with blue eyes so expressive that they seemed to tell a story all of their own, and yet he saw no resemblance to the man that owned the house.

A distant relative, perhaps, thought Thor.

The sound of his men working seemed loud, despite the floor between them. He realised that old houses weren't built with sound-proofing in mind, something that he would have to consider when the extension was added on later, and yet the music from " what was assumedly " the master bedroom was incredibly clear. The music was sharp and appeared loud to drown out the noise below, and Thor paused outside the bedroom door to listen to the changing tempo and increasing frantic nature of the notes. It was an emotional piece.

He thought nothing of throwing open the door wide. It revealed not the bedroom as expected, but a room that seemed converted into a studio for an array of artistic endeavours. There were canvases everywhere, although the paint was not contained solely to them, and various sketches littered the floor and abstract designs vandalised the walls, and " centre of it all " stood a man that looked out of place amid such chaos. The man asked, in a cold tone:

"Do you always trespass into private rooms?"

Thor snorted and crossed his arms in response, as he glanced the man over. He was handsome and ethereally beautiful, with black hair in curls just below his shoulders and green eyes that were brighter than any of his paint, and yet he looked exhausted and pale. The outfit he wore was comprised mostly of black and green, completed with a leather coat that fell to his ankles in a way that made Thor laugh. He marched over to the man " perhaps in his early twenties " and kicked away stray paint bottles and various brushes.

"I was told that I was fired," said Thor.

"Indeed, you are." The man looked him over. "My mother is paying you for your work, but if you are unable to do that work then you forfeit your right to be paid. You were an hour late this morning. It may interest you to know that I have no intention of putting my life on hold, merely because you cannot complete a simple job and are intent on slacking off."

"My men were early today. They came especially as you said that you wanted them gone by four at the latest! You will penalise me for being on time? You cannot fire me; this is my company and my word is all that matters, as such I will return to work as planned."

"Ah, but it isn't your company, is it, Thor _Odin's Son_?" The man gave an infuriating smirk, as he pulled at the sleeves of his coat. "You are merely the son of the owner. I am led to believe that said owner is also an acquaintance of my mother; he may be very interested to know that his clear nepotism has resulted in total corruption. If you arrived an hour later than your peers, yet expected to leave when I requested, that is an hour less work, yes?"

Thor kept silent. He could not deny the clear logic, but he didn't want this man to win the argument at hand. The music drifted over loudly, until the man wandered over to the stereo " that lay awkwardly on the floor beneath the bay windows " and turned the machine off, and yet there was something about his movements that was both enticing and infuriating. He moved deliberately and slowly, with a swing to each step that was almost taunting, and soon he jumped up to sit upon the windowsill with that ever-growing grin.

"You realise I cannot be replaced," spat Thor.

"Ah, yes, I was told you were an artist and not a mere painter." He furrowed his brow. "Your expertise is in murals and decorative art, am I correct? Well, as much as I am loath to take on more work at a time such as this, you may have noticed that _I _am an artist myself."

"This is what you call art?" Thor laughed. "A mural is nothing like your paintings here, but even if they were then I would not be worried. The art I see here is mediocre at best; you're nothing but an angry teenager wielding a brush instead of a blade, and all I see are complete wastes of paper and canvas. You would do better to turn to poetry instead."

The look that the other man gave him was deathly cold; he lowered his head until shadows appeared under his eyes and he looked almost mad, while his hands gripped the edge of the sill until that already pale

skin turned inhumanly white. It was clear that Thor crossed a line, but clearer still that the man was not as fragile as he looked. The muscles under his arms held a definite shape and tone to them, one that indicated he was likely trained or could at least hold his own. The man asked in a slow and monotone voice:

"Do you know my name?"

"I see no relevance here," said Thor.

"So the name 'Loki Laufeyson' means nought to you?"

Thor quirked his eyebrows in surprise, as he finally had a face to a name. Loki was known as one of the youngest prominent artists and gallery owners in the area, albeit word had it that his mother had bought the London gallery and a lot of his publicity. The works he displayed " both his own and those of others " tended to focus on frosty landscapes and cold panoramas, with the occasional piece centred on loss and abandonment. Thor said mockingly:

"Your name is as worthless to me as it is to your critics."

"I was excited at first that Mother chose to hire you in particular," said Loki. "The name 'Laufey' means little here, while it is so very rare to come across a fellow Iclander, and I thought perhaps I might meet a likeminded soul. Alas, from one artist to another, let me say that I hope your art is better than your work ethic. You'll need it to make a living once fired."

"You are nothing but a self-entitled prince of the manor." Thor gave a mocking laugh, as he shook his head and let his blond locks frame his face. "Here I thought you could be reasoned with, but you are nothing but arrogance and cruelty! Just like Laufey."

"You would dare compare me to my father?"

Loki stood to his full height. He was perhaps an inch or two shorter than Thor, at the very most, as such he looked more intimidating than most, and it was clear he was used to people obeying his every whim as if they were orders from royalty itself. The light from the window framed him, enough that it cast his body in shadow and left an annoying after-image any time that Thor closed his eyes, and Loki " clearly beyond reason " stepped forward.

He moved slowly at first, until he quickened his pace and stood before Thor. They were a few centimetres apart, close enough that Loki's nose nearly touched his own, and he could feel warm and moist breath upon his lips. Thor refused to back away. He would not be frightened by a child given more power than they could know how to wield, as such he lowered his head and took in those green eyes, noting the freckles of black around the irises. There was no way to quell the fast beating of his heart, as he swallowed hard to fight back control.

"You know nothing of my father," spat Loki.

"I know the stories of embezzlement, insider trading, and tax evasion." Thor smirked. "It is no wonder that the boy seeks to exert control over others! You have a lot to prove, don't you? It must hurt to know that back home your work pales in comparison to his

deeds."

"Oh, you're so superior to me, aren't you, Thor? Well, at least I earned what respect I have among the art community, and at least I have an identity outside that of my father. Tell me, do you enjoy living under the thumb of Odin? I heard he sent you to Britain to get rid of you. My, is that a sigh of anger I hear? It's true, isn't it? You were exiled here to expand his little company, because you were too much of a liability to keep at home with reasonable folk.

"I wonder whether Helblindi's jaw ever set right; well, no matter, what's done is done. That blood is on your hands, staining your skin, and that red is on your ledger. How many good deeds will you need to prove you're worthy to go back? How many black eyes and random bar fights do you need to work off? Go home, Thor. It's the best place for a spoiled princess."

Thor let out a roar of rage. He felt his fingers around Loki's neck; he acted before he knew what he was doing, so that he used all his strength to lift Loki from the floor and carried him across the room, until he had thrown him against the wall. Loki remained pinned by those thick fingers. Thor felt Loki scratch and claw at his hand and forearm, as his feet barely touched the floor and struggled for purchase, and he could hear the artist's breath coming out in pants and gasps. He struggled to breathe. He looked on in fear.

It was only on sight of that same fear that Thor let go. Loki stumbled forward, which forced Thor a step back to give him space, as he rubbed at his throat and tried to massage away the inevitable and oncoming bruise. Thor turned his back on him; the sweat to his skin and beating of his pulse both irritated him, especially as the adrenaline rush almost erased what guilt he felt, and it was difficult to fight back the shame.

"You really are a monster," laughed Loki.

Loki pulled himself up straight, but soon fell back against the wall. He tilted his head up, while he closed his eyes and carried on laughing, and his hand slowly trailed in a way that looked far more tempting than likely intended. The younger man was flushed, while his smile slowly faded away from sight, and Thor realised "had the circumstances been vastly different" this was a man that could have fascinated him and lured him into something more.

"Do not test me, Loki," said Thor.

"No, I want to see where this rage takes you," whispered Loki. "Beat me. Break me. Let me see exactly what the son of Odin can do. Every bone snapped or blood vessel burst will be enough to have you thrown in jail, and I doubt Daddy's influence extends this far across the sea. You've been fired, Thor. Let's not add an arrest onto matters."

"I will not give into your petty taunts. I came here to prove myself worthy of taking my father's place when the time comes, and that means I will control my anger. You know full well that you cannot finish the mural you requested, as such I will come in tomorrow."

"I have more than enough talent to complete a measly -"

"You do not and you know it."

Thor gave him a warning look. It was enough to silence Loki, who knew his strength could not compete and still wore the bruise about his neck as proof, and they also both knew that Loki's art was abstract at best, nowhere near as specialised in realism enough to aim for the landscape specified by his mother. Thor lifted his hand and pointed a finger at him, before he shook it and took one step forward in a further unspoken threat.

"Keep away from me, Loki."

He marched quickly out of the room, leaving Loki to nurse his wounds. The door slammed loudly behind him, as he caught a sudden silence immediately after, and he called out to his men to get back to work. Thor noticed one of the frames on the hallway wall opposite shake, likely from the force of the slam, and he realised that the woman from earlier – the one in almost all of Loki's photographs – must have been his mother. There was a photograph of her next to what was clearly Laufey, with Loki no older than ten between them.

Thor tried not to pay it much mind. He ignored the passing familiarity and curiosity, as he marched downstairs and threw himself down next to the wall he earlier worked upon. He sensed Hogun pause in his carpentry, while Sif had yet to begin the rewiring job, and so it was Sif that came over and sat next to him for a brief moment, as he prepared the paints and tools to begin on the mural. He tried to hold his tongue and not lash out.

"Is everything okay?" Sif asked.

"Everything is fine," snapped Thor. "Let me paint."

They sat in silence for a long while, until Sif left to begin her work. Volstagg and Fandral talked between themselves from afar, while people walked in and out of the living room to get to various other places, and then – from far above – came a sound that seemed designed solely to annoy Thor. It was low at first, but then grew louder as if in competition with the workmen below, and soon Thor realised that Loki was trying to prove a point.

Thor began to loathe that classical music.

2. Chapter 2

****Chapter Two****

'_Explain yourself, Thor_.'

Thor glared at the screen. The laptop was set awkwardly on the plastic sheeting; it would occasionally slide whenever Thor moved his limbs, so that the artificial light from above would strike the screen just enough to hide the image, and the fact that one speaker was broken made the sounds more ominous than realistic. The image of his father was made blurrier by the fact Odin had sat in front of a large window, forgetting the Icelandic daylight cast him in shadow and made the camera more difficult to focus. He was impossible to read.

The house was empty today, which was a relief. The workmen had finished their work, but now waited for Thor to finish his painting so that they could install the floorboard and send in the interior decorators, and he was grateful that no one was around to hear the inevitable lecture that would soon come. Odin seemed to sit at his desk, with back straight and grey hair aging him considerably, and the eye-patch did not detract from his regal appearance.

"I do not understand, Father," said Thor coolly.

"Ah, is that so? Then this photograph means nothing to you?"

Odin held up a picture before the screen. It was impossible to see at first, far too close to the camera and much too cast in shadow, but soon Odin pulled it backward and revealed to Thor the contents upon the paper. The subject was clear: Loki's bruised neck. Thor could see the distinct patterns left by his fingers, although he was distracted briefly by how Loki had loosened his shirt and arched his neck to display the marks, and he mentally cursed the fact that the young adult could be so devious as to send his father photographic proof.

"He goaded me into â€" "

"Oh, so he goaded you?" Odin slammed down the photograph. "Did he goad you as Helblindi goaded you? Did he speak as cruelly to you as BÃ½leistr supposedly spoke? I told you not of his relation to Laufey and his men, precisely as you could not be trusted to leave your childish grudges at home. This job came as a favour to an acquaintance, do you realise that?"

"Any acquaintance associated with Laufey is one not worth associating with in turn!" Thor pointed his finger at the screen. "I have worked according to any professional standard! I was even willing to work for a fraction of my usual pay for this 'favour' to some filth!"

"You will not insult our clientele, Thor, least of all Frigga ArnadÃ³ttir. I should not have to justify every order or request to my son, least of all regarding work when that same son works for me. You are lucky that Loki Laufeyson has refused to press charges. I order you to stay out of his way; you will not speak to him, spend time alone with him, or antagonise him into any misbehaviour. I will not have my relationship with Frigga jeopardised."

Thor saw the photograph flat on his father's desk. He half-suspected that it was sent in electronic format, with some employee â€" likely Heimdall â€" printing it for on old man's behalf, and he wondered just how long Odin had taken to calm down upon receiving it. It was hard to take his eyes from it; he could barely remember the feeling of flesh in hand, only the ever-growing sense of rage and the racing of his heart, and it frightened him that he could be capable of such violence without even realising the extent of his actions. He sighed.

"Very well," said Thor. "I will act accordingly."

"Good, see that you do, my son."

The screen went black.

Thor felt that ever familiar rage seep back in, along with the humiliation that he could be commanded by a man that he considered almost out of touch with reality, and he knew he would never prove his worth until he learned self-control and respect for his elders. The beating of his pulse deafened him, while everything else became white noise, and a cold sweat broke across his palms as he tried to quell his frustration. It was all for nothing.

He slammed closed the laptop with a roar.

There was an audible crack. He dreaded to think of the damage done, especially when he would need to claim the expense from his father, but he couldn't bring himself to care. Thor climbed to his feet and looked down to the floor; there were various tubes of paint, bottles of water and various pencils, and he was tempted to grab a brush and destroy the mural as it stood so far. He wanted to watch the paint bleed into the trees and rivers, watch the desecrated by sheer vandalism, and maybe start again with something borne from his anger.

The violence was stopped by the sound of someone laughing, which "as he turned to face his intruder" turned out to be a mistake. Loki swayed in the archway. He must have come in through the conservatory and through the kitchen, and seemingly had donned boots and coat and outer layers all across the newly tiled floor. There was no denying how handsome he looked, especially in nothing but a barely buttoned green shirt and loose trousers.

"Do you know they were once a couple?"

Thor did a double take. He looked to Loki and saw no signs of a lie, although there was a glass of red wine in his hand that threatened to spill with every movement, and Loki himself smiled in a way that was almost sincere. The black hair was loose, matted, and absent of the many products he usually wore, although Thor only saw him in passing over the past fortnight since the incident, and his skin was flushed from the small expanse of naked chest all the way to his cheeks. Loki licked his lips, as Thor walked towards him.

"What do you mean?"

"Isn't that clear?" Loki sipped his wine. "Mother refuses to visit me, at least while you and your workmen are here. I found it odd. It turns out " if you would believe it " she was once married to your father. I couldn't get much more out of her, mind you. I imagine that's what the 'favour' is all about; I always knew she gained a lot from her divorce settlement, hence my standard of living, but I never knew she got that money from Odin Borson. Strange."

"You are a liar, Loki." Thor stepped closer. "Do not eavesdrop on me again. Do not involve my father in our disagreements again. I know not why you chose to wait so long to stir up such trouble, but if it was to get my attention then you have it. What do you want? If it's drama that you are after then I am not the one to appease you."

"Oh, if I wanted drama, I have enough of that at home. I'm not lying, you know. My mother explicitly said that Odin was willing to help her out with renovations, but she was expressed forbid to meet you or contact you directly. All communication was to go through him."

"Why on Earth would he make such a command?"

"Perhaps to have an excuse to talk to her?"

Loki downed the rest of the wine. He turned and threw the glass across the kitchen, where it struck a cabinet just off the side from the oven and smashed into pieces, and " adding another job to the list of those to be done " a red stain appeared on the wood. It bled downwards into several rivulets, until it dripped slowly onto the tiles and the sound echoed about the silent room. Loki began to laugh dangerously at this, in a way that put Thor on edge.

"Are mothers always this way?" Loki asked.

He turned back and reached out to Thor. The touch of his hand upon Thor's stubble-covered cheek was cool and comforting, almost familiar in some distant way, and he stroked with as much curiosity as he did sincere interest. Loki eventually pulled away, before he stumbled into the living room and spun around with a melodramatic flair, which somehow gave him a far darker edge that Thor could ever consider. If Thor was one for fists, this was a man of manipulation. Loki could likely prove just as angry as Thor ever could.

"I hear yours died in childbirth," said Loki. "Mine died when she lied."

"So she married before she met Laufey. I see no crime."

"You wouldn't, would you?" Loki bowed deep with a smirk. "How old are you, Thor? Twenty-six? Twenty-seven? It matters not. You were too young to remember the news; Laufey lost custody of his youngest son many years ago, something I find curious, because it is so very rare for the father to gain full custody of the child, is it not?"

"My father told me this in brief. You were four when taken from Laufey, five when full custody was transferred to Frigga, and " of this " he commends her and her strength. I have oft heard in these past few weeks how lucky you were to be given to her."

"Yes, lucky indeed. See, it seems odd to me that a child would be taken from its mother, but even more so that a father so lucky to get full custody would jeopardise in such a manner. I asked her whether I was the result of an affair, which would explain a great deal of things, especially when Laufey himself has often taunted me through the years. He had made it no secret that he has secrets, secrets bought with money won from a divorce."

Thor looked curiously to Loki. The younger man had taken to walking about the room with sway to his hips, one that made his trousers hang lower about his hips and his shirt come loose from where it was previously tucked, and soon he looked almost indecent. There was no ignoring the way his long hair caressed his neck, just as Thor could barely bite back his hunger at those half-lidded eyes and flushed cheeks, and he wondered whether Loki knew what effect his actions had upon him. Loki eventually stopped at the staircase.

He leaned against the railing and rested one foot upon a high step, while he threw back his head and let the long column of neck " now free from bruises " remain on display. Thor marched over to him, as

he fought the urge to leave fresh marks, and stood a foot from him with his frustrations barely contained. The smell of alcohol was heavy in the air, enough that Loki could not have hid it even had he tried, and there was also a faint smell of smoke.

"What are you implying?"

"There are three years between us," muttered Loki. "Do you think Odin married her in your mother's absence, only to be cheated on by a wife unable to resist the advances of his rival? I have resolved to see my mother again tomorrow; I will demand to see my birth certificate, along with my brothers', as I sense some discrepancies at play. I know not what they seek to gain from hiding such things from me, but I will work out their secrets."

"Does it matter when our parents were married? If they sought to hide such things, there were far better ways to do so than to leave us alone together in one house. You are making too many assumptions based on things you know nothing about. You are drunk, Loki. Go sleep off whatever it is that has brought this upon you. I do not have the patience."

"Do you know what fascinates me most? Had Odin married Frigga some years previous, we could perhaps be related . . . half-brothers . . . blood. I fascinate you, do I not? Imagine that, but with the forbidden taboo of what could never become. Imagine that."

"I mean it, Loki. Leave me be and sleep off this stupor!"

"Would you join me, if I asked?"

Loki reached out and let his hand rest upon Thor. It was almost platonic, merely a loose touch on his shoulder and fingers that clumsily traced patterns upon the bulging muscles, and Loki's expression changed as he felt what was previously off-limits. He seemed surprised that Thor's body was as strong as it looked, firm and larger than life, and he licked his lips and looked Thor over with a heavy breath. There was something erotic about it, particularly how he looked so innocent beneath his desire, as well as so fragile.

The hand moved lower, although Thor did not react. It ran over his vest " pausing only to linger on his pectoral muscles " until it became nothing but curious and light touches from his fingertips alone. They stopped when they reached the belt of his worn jeans. Loki licked his lips and pulled him toward him with great force, until Thor felt his hardening length pressed against Loki's, and only a hair's breadth lay between them. Loki intentionally spread his legs.

"Mother always used to say the body is a temple," said Loki slowly. "I believed her; I treated any potential intimacies as a gift to be given and not a right to be had, but now I feel like rebellion and I wish to desecrate the temple. You will use me and abuse me. Break me."

"You would give yourself to a stranger just to spite your family?"

"I would give myself simply to feel something."

Loki reached down to cup Thor, while his other hand held his neck. He pulled him down into a kiss that was both lazy and clumsy, yet somehow it was all the more perfect for it, and Thor tasted the wine heavy upon his tongue. Those lips were perfectly soft, while Loki moved so as to wrap his legs around Thor's waist and awkwardly removed his hand from his belt, and soon both hands were gripped into his hair and pulling painfully tight.

Thor pulled back for breath, as he let out a long roar, before he observed Loki. Those lips were bruised and plump, with just a speck of saliva upon them, while the man himself panted for breath and looked almost uncomfortable pressed against the banister. Thor leaned in and began to place kisses along Loki's neck, tasting the soft skin as he ripped open the shirt fully, and soon it was slid down and exposed Loki's body fully, as nipples hardened and Loki let loose a full body shiver. He merely groaned as Thor delivered a series of love-bites.

It was difficult to remain in control.

One of Loki's hands came down to undo his belt and jeans, before it slipped inside his loose boxers and took a hold of his hard length. That was a moment that should have been heaven, but it reminded Thor of how far they were going and how heartbroken that Loki had been, and suddenly he ripped his mouth away from Loki's shoulder and gasped for breath. He removed the hand of the desperate man beneath him, feeling his erection throb for attention, and a part of him regretted stopping when he knew he could have Loki.

"I will not take advantage of you," said Thor.

"We have the house to ourselves," whispered Loki. "No one to hear me scream."

"As appealing as that may be, I must decline. You want to be wanted; it is no different to a man that uses his fists when he wishes to be heard, but neither method can truly get the attention either man needs. If I come to you, it won't be to enable you."

Loki gave him a piercingly long look. Thor almost expected a slap or a punch to follow, but neither of those followed. Instead, Loki shoved Thor firmly backward; it was enough to knock him off his feet, which caused him to stumble and fall upon the table behind him, and it took all his balance and strength to remain mostly standing. He hadn't expected such strength from Loki. He began to suspect that he allowed himself to be choked that day those few weeks ago, perhaps out of a need to be hurt and punished.

"It is your loss, Thor Odinson," spat Loki.

The younger man marched upstairs with a great deal of poise, so that he looked almost indifferent to the rejection of Thor, but the venomous look that he wore said it all, and Thor " still aching and feeling the soreness of his hardness " wondered whether he would suffer worse in the long run for hurting Loki's pride. A door soon slammed from the second floor, when Loki was finally out of sight, and Thor was left to deal with his own 'problem' alone.

He regretted having not followed.

3. Chapter 3

Chapter Three

Thor felt his phone buzz.

He was tempted to ignore it, just for a moment. The past few days were filled with Loki's snide remarks and 'accidental' sabotaging of his mural, along with increasingly petty complaints sent to his father, and he dreaded what call would come next. It was already late in the evening; Loki had stormed upstairs only half-an-hour previous, but there had been nothing except loud bangs and cries every since, some most distracting.

The living room was icy cold. There was no way to paint with the windows closed, as such the night air had seeped in and chilled his bones, and the black sky outside left him with no natural light with which to work. He occasionally had to stop to blow warm air on his hands, while the steam from the mug of tea beside him was soon swept away by the breeze, and soon it would be time to call things a night. A loud crash came again from upstairs, but Thor ignored it to pull his phone from his pocket. The image of Sif flashed on the screen.

He stood up and cricked his back, while he looked over to the stairs. Loki was evidently in the throes of some tantrum, likely from the inevitable 'talk' with Frigga, but he would certainly report Thor to Odin for 'slacking off' should he see him on the phone. The noises seemed to say he was suitably distracted, however, and so Thor swept his thumb across the glass screen and raised the phone to his ear. Sif's voice was clear and loud:

'Thor, where are you?'

"I am at Loki's home." Thor looked up as something shattered. "I planned on finishing the mural tonight, so that the others could work tomorrow, but it does not seem likely. I believe I will need to return early tomorrow morning. It should be done by the time you arrive."

'Well, that's where things fall apart. Loki stopped by the office; he gave a set of keys to Volstagg and told him to let the crew in and out, said he would be out of town tomorrow, and he must have been serious. Judging by the key rings, this isn't a spare set. It's his set.' Sif gave a long sigh. 'Is something going on? He's related to Laufey, Thor, you must â€'

There came a deafening scream.

It was enough to make Thor jump back, as he glanced up the staircase. The sound was something brutal and primal, enough that it broke off into something like a sob, and the crash that accompanied it sounded like furniture being thrown. Sif must have heard it, too. The silence that followed was uncomfortably loud, so that Thor was hyper-aware of every beat of his heart and every twitter of the birds outside, and â€' from the kitchen â€' he heard a window swing to and fro with an annoyingly irregular rhythm. He felt a cold wash over him.

'Thor, what was that? Is everything okay?'

"I will call you back," he said.

Thor slammed the phone onto a nearby worktable. The adrenaline that coursed through him gave him a speed that he was unaware he possessed, as he felt his body run towards the staircase and towards the second floor, all the while feeling a cold sweat upon his body. He threw open every door as he searched for Loki, not finding him within his studio, and soon a panic began to set in. Thor felt his breathing speed up, while his stomach felt light.

Each door he opened revealed nothing, which left him in fear for Loki's life. He knew not what the younger man had done or planned to do, but only that he was potentially hurt and every wrong room was a minute longer that he went without help. Thor screamed out. Loki remained silent, even as Thor continued his search, but "soon enough" he heard a dull thud from behind the door furthest from him. It sounded like someone had collapsed, with that all too familiar sound Thor recognised from many bar and street fights.

He called out once more.

The lack of response compelled him forward. He swung open the door and froze for a brief moment, unable to fully take in the sight that he saw. The room was completely trashed. The mattress had been thrown off the bed, while the curtain rod was pulled from the wall, and even wallpaper had been shredded almost inhumanely across the now stained carpet. Glass lay everywhere; Thor spotted a broken computer monitor, along with smashed photo-frames and various ornaments, and then he noticed the cause of such mayhem.

"Loki, what have you done?"

Loki gave a sad smile from where he sat. He lay brokenly against a far wall, dressed in nothing but rough and pale green pyjamas, and with hair matted and loose across his shoulders in a wild manner. He was barefooted, but there was a deep cut across the right. It was no surprise when there was so much glass about, and "judging by how his cheeks looked sullen and deathly pale" he had either lost some blood or was in a state of shock. He looked over to Thor with unfocussed eyes and tear-stained cheeks.

"I'm adopted," whispered Loki.

He said those words as if they answered everything. Thor saw his eyes well up with unshed tears, while Loki turned his head and began to laugh in a rather mechanical manner, and Thor "not knowing how to react" left momentarily to fetch a cloth from the en suite. It took a while to find a clean flannel; he ran it through the water and wrung it out, before he headed back to Loki and sat carefully at his feet. The moment of silence gave him time to think.

Thor swallowed hard, as he reached out for Loki's foot. The younger man flinched, as he tried to pull the sore limb away, but Thor held tight and shot him a warning look. It took time to clean the wound properly, especially when he was required to carefully remove a few shards of glass, and it was luck alone that prevented Loki from needing stitches. Loki's toes curled and his foot twitched with every touch, while his fingers scratched deep into the carpet, and he

seemed as relieved as Thor when the cleaning was finally over.

"All this because you are adopted?" Thor asked.

Loki jerked his limbs away violently. There was a sneer upon his lips, as the tears began to dry up, and soon he attempted to climb into a standing position. The weight upon his injured foot caused him to cry out; Thor jumped upward and grabbed Loki about his waist, as he sought to keep the younger man standing, and he felt " for the first time " just how slender Loki truly was beneath his layers. He guided Loki to the flipped mattress and sat him down.

"You know nothing," spat Loki.

"I know that this reaction is not normal," countered Thor.

"Aye, perhaps you are right." Loki gave a dark smile. "How often are adopted children rejected not once, but twice? You know nothing of how I feel. It is no wonder that my mother kept this from me for so long, because " after all " what person can live with the knowledge they are disposable, forgettable, and worthless? I am a monster, Thor."

"Loki, I do not know what was said, but I know such words were not used! Come, you are upset and you are in shock. Let me help you to a spare room; you should not be alone like this, perhaps I can call your mother to come see to you or "

The laugh Loki let out was frightening; it was dull and broken, so that it did little except to mask the tears that fell from his eyes, and soon he looked to Thor with something like curiosity and longing. He reached out and placed a hand upon Thor's cheek, where he stroked his cheek lightly with the back of his thumb. The touch was intimate and soothing. Thor reached out in turn and held the back of Loki's neck gently, as he tried to decipher him.

"I have no mother," said Loki coldly.

"You are too harsh on the woman that raised you," replied Thor.

"Did I ever tell you how my father lost custody?"

Thor looked to Loki curiously. The younger man fell back gracefully upon the mattress, as he gazed up with a dazed expression to the ceiling above. There was something almost serene about his expression, while he rested one forearm under his head as a makeshift pillow, and his other hand trailed with the hem of his top. It pulled on occasion to reveal a perfectly smooth and toned abdomen, something that would have tempted Thor at any other time, but there was no intent and no seduction there. Loki merely sought to distract himself.

"You told me it was neglect," whispered Thor.

"Indeed." Loki let a tear fall. "My biological mother was apparently one named Fjrbauti. In a twist of irony, she actually did die in childbirth. My father left the raising of his three sons entirely to her, so " as you can imagine " her death was most difficult upon him, but fortunately two of those same sons were relatively old enough to fend for themselves. I was the youngest . . . a runt. It

came to be that one day he had a business meeting here in England.

"Helblindi and Bǫleistr were left with a family member, but he claimed that he would be taking me with him on his trip. It was two days into his absence where a neighbour heard crying from within our house; they knocked on doors and looked in through windows, but no one answered and no one came to answer their calls. The police were called. He had left me in the house alone, apparently as it was a 'win-win' situation. If I survived, I was intelligent and resilient enough to be worthy of his son. If I died, it was one less son to bother about."

"I never knew his actions were that cruel," said Thor.

"I have never forgotten that day, but it traumatised me less than you would think. I was a child, of course, but I assumed that I had merely been forgotten and not intentionally left, and I was more than capable of using chairs to climb up onto surfaces. I managed to make sandwiches and eat the fruit left out, but one day I fell from the counter and broke my leg from the fall. It was the reason why I cried and what drew the police. He faced charges."

It was an admission that drew a sigh from Loki. He let his hand fall flat upon his stomach with a slapping sound, which must have been quite painful from the volume, and yet he simply continued to look absently about the room with a lost look. Thor carefully lay beside him, as he sought to erase the space between them. He followed Loki's gaze, while his hands rested behind the back of his head, and he thought heavily on what Loki told him. The wind blew loudly from outside, but the blankets were scattered about the room.

"Did he face the courts?"

"I didn't ask my mother the details," admitted Loki. "The story was one I already knew, but â€" regardless of everything â€" he is out of jail now and free to roam. I was taken from him and placed into foster care, which is where my mother came into contact with me. I supposedly spent a year with her and her husband and biological son. It was the perfect family, so much so that they sought to adopt me officially together, but Odin Borson soon changed his mind."

Thor felt something run cold inside him.

The wind howled outside; leaves fell from nearby trees and caught in the corners of the windowpanes, while a car alarm sounded from not far away, and the rain lashed so strongly that he could no longer discern any coherent shapes outside. He rolled onto his side, where he propped his head upon his bent arm. There was no sign of a lie upon Loki's lips, but he felt sure he would have remembered a mother that lingered for so long in his childhood and a 'brother' that remained with him for a full year. He felt his mouth run dry.

The insinuations were clear, but somehow impossible to process. He felt the sting of betrayal run deep, until his eyes failed to focus and he felt a sharp pain in his temple, and even his breathing began to quicken under the intense stress. He took a hold of Loki's shoulder. It was easy to roll Loki onto his side, as he felt as broken as a rag doll, and his head lolled with the movement in a disconcerting manner. Thor looked to him darkly and leaned

forward.

"I do not understand," said Thor coldly.

"Your mother did not die in childbirth, Thor." Loki closed his eyes briefly. "Laufey used both his and Odin's fame to his advantage; he put forth insidious rumours in the press, claimed Odin had framed him and stolen his child, and â€" by the end of it all â€" Odin's businesses were taking a hit from the scandal. He wanted my mother to put me back into the system. She refused. It caused an irreconcilable rift between them, which resulted in their divorce.

"Mother used the money she gained to buy Laufey's silence. It also bought her full guardianship and uncontested rights; I was told she put forth a small amount of 'good faith' money to him, out of her own pocket, and then paid a substantial sum once the divorce was finalised and Laufey had signed all papers. I have had minimal contact with him since. On my tenth birthday, he asked me how old I was and removed a wad of notes from his pocket, only to hand me a five-dollar bill. A low amount made worse by it being foreign currency."

Loki gave an empty laugh, as he observed Thor carefully. There was a strange intimacy in lying next to one another, something that seemed like a step forward, but Thor could feel no love when he was so consumed with rage. He felt flushed. Loki gave a low sigh and reached out to touch his cheek, but Thor pulled away with a growl almost feral, before he sat upright and stared out across the trashed room. When Loki spoke next, it was almost nostalgic:

"I received a Christmas card last year, I believe."

There was something tragic about his observation. Thor struggled to comprehend how a father could forget about his youngest son, sending cards only when memory was jogged or the urge struck, and he felt almost grateful to have Odin as a father. Still, the idea that his mother could still be alive hung heavy in the air. He saw a flash of lightning from the corner of his eye; he remembered stories of his namesake, unable to place who told him of these gods and legends, and he wondered whether she had once recited them to him.

"So Frigga is my mother?" Thor asked.

"Hmm? Oh, yes," muttered Loki. "I asked about that. It seems that she has refused to make contact with you, because she wishes for you to see her on your terms when you feel ready to commit to such a meeting. I didn't have the heart to tell her that she 'died' in childbirth."

"I spent my birthdays grieving for her loss! I lit candles for her. I prayed for her." Thor clenched his fists until the veins burst out. "I must have been seven or so when she left, but all those memories of her -? I thought some were dreams, while others my father insisted must have been an aunt of mine that long since moved away. My life was a lie?"

"Welcome to the club," spat Loki.

Loki climbed shakily to his feet; he stumbled slightly with the pressure to his injured foot, but soon managed to distribute his

weight enough to make walking easier on him. He wandered over to the window and looked out over the gardens, where the light from outside hit him just right and reflected strange patterns from the raindrops upon him, and Thor " as he looked over to Loki with some interest " found himself fascinated by his resilience.

It brought Thor to his feet, as he moved the mattress back upon the bed-frame. He managed to get one punch in during the process, which he was sure brought a small smirk from Loki, but the younger man didn't so much as turn his head or his gaze at the sound. The only real response was one of a small jump when Thor returned to his side, this time with a robe found upon the floor that he draped over Loki's shoulders. Loki looked to him with surprise. Those green eyes were wide, as he wrapped the robe around him, before a fresh tear fell.

"Abandoned by two fathers," said Loki.

"My mother abandoned me to raise you," said Thor.

"That is true." Loki let out a sincere laugh. "It would be funny, were it not so tragic. I half-suspect that my mother asked for your father's company to work here on purpose, as it would be inevitable we would find out the truth eventually, and she wouldn't have to ruin whatever twisted relationship she still maintains with Odin by telling us directly. It's . . . clever."

"It is manipulative and wrong, Loki! You have every right to be angry, but your anger should be aimed at those who hid the truth from you! Your mother " _my _mother " lied to you, but it was Odin and Laufey that abused you as they did. Do not hurt yourself like this."

"Why not? I spent my whole life " _my whole life, Thor_ " knowing that I meant nothing to Laufey! I " I had to watch while my brothers were showered with affection and love, always wondering what I did wrong, why I was so inferior . . . why I was so unlovable. Parents are meant to love their children unconditionally, are they not? After _years_ living with him, he still could not form an attachment? I need to know what is wrong with me. I feel "

Thor embraced him.

He was not sure what compelled him, but he pulled Loki close against him. The fabric of the dressing gown was soft under his callused fingertips, while Loki's black hair smelled fresh and somewhat sweet just under his chin, and he could feel Loki's hands pressed between their bodies against his chest. They stood for a long moment before the window. The sounds of the weather outside battled on, until Loki's choked and broken breaths added to the noises, and soon Thor felt Loki begin to cry on earnest. He said nothing as he held him.

The cries eventually petered out. Thor swept Loki up and carried him over to the bed, where he placed him down and made to move away, but Loki " both vulnerable and ashamed " took a fast hold of his wrist and pulled him back. They looked at one another for a long time, unable to process anything and only able to exist in the moment, and Thor found himself guided beside Loki and laid down beside him, as he wrapped arms around his waist.

It felt more comforting than it ought; Thor rarely gave such intimacy to any of his bed partners, choosing instead to keep things uncomplicated, and this was something that he missed during his life. He rested his head into the crook of Loki's neck, while the other man grew cold and fidgeted back against Thor. They listened in silence to the storm. Loki's breathing soon returned to normal, enough that Thor felt some of his anger and frustration abate, and there was an element of relief that Loki was finally calm.

"I did not wish for you to see me like this," said Loki.

"Be grateful that I did." Thor breathed deeply. "I still have yet to learn to control my temper. It would not be a lie to say that you perhaps prevented me from doing greater damage elsewhere, as I do not trust myself not to lash out should I be left alone."

"Do not think I will be the one to hold your leash. I leave tomorrow."

"Leave where? You should take time to process this."

Loki gave a sigh. He reached down to touch upon Thor's hand, which rested not far above his hip, and he let his fingers trail loose patterns over the golden skin. Thor felt a momentary panic, as he thought back to Sif's words and the strangeness that Loki would give free access to his house, and " with the trauma he endured " he feared the worst. There was something dark inside Loki, something that might potentially manifest in the worst way.

"I have a ticket to Iceland, Thor."

The news surprised Thor; he felt a cold sense of dread wash over him, as he thought about his own anger and how he would have responded had Loki not needed his help, and he knew exactly what Loki meant to do. He leaned over to look Loki in the eyes, where he saw a hard anger that was all too familiar to him, and he saw also the resolution in his expression. This was not something that Loki could be dissuaded from, and he would rather risk destroying his own reputation than allow Odin to go unpunished. Thor felt pity for him.

"You mean to confront Odin, don't you?"

"Let us rest for now. I am tired."

Thor was not reassured by his answer. He placed a chaste kiss to Loki's cheek, which the younger man batted away with a sound of disgust, before he ignored Thor to nuzzle into his pillow and attempt to sleep. Thor whispered to him gently:

"It will get better, I promise."

Loki laughed in response.

4. Chapter 4

****Chapter Four****

'_Thor, I apologise for leaving before you have awoken._

_You've probably noticed my absence, if so I ask of you only one thing: do not follow. _

I will be back after I have spoken to Odin.

_Goodbye for now. _

Loki.'

* * *

><p>Thor blew warm air onto his hands.<p>

The temperature was below freezing; it may have only been a few weeks, but already it felt almost impossible to adjust to the colder climate. There was a layer of ice over most surfaces, while every breath was visible in the air, and he regretted the rush in which he had followed Loki to the airport. Thor had left with only the clothes on his back, pausing only to collect his passport and emergency credit card from home, and the lack of layers was beginning to feel like a form of torture. He hopped from foot to foot where he stood.

Loki had been spectacularly good at hiding from him. He kept to the first-class lounge, blended in with the crowd when the first-class boarded, and " inevitably " was one of the first to leave the plane, which gave him quite the head start. Thor had called his father on reaching his family home, simply to ask if any unexpected 'visitors' had called, but Odin insisted that none had and lectured him severely on having returned to Iceland.

Thor had stood watch over the house since.

It was growing late in the afternoon, but so far there was no sight of Loki. There was a steady stream of people going in and out of Odin's home, likely due to what seemed like some sort of business gathering or a social meeting, and " each time the front door opened " there came a soft sound of classical music that reminded Thor greatly of Loki's personal tastes. The composer that played by well have been the same one Loki often enjoyed, enough that Thor wondered whether the younger man remembered such music from his childhood.

"Hurry up, Loki. Hurry up."

If he lingered in the street much longer, it was possible the police would be called or Odin would notice him outside, at which point " regardless of his wishes " he would be swept away into trouble and unable to stop Loki. The daylight would soon be gone. He prepared to cross the street and announce his arrival, but soon spotted a taxi pull up outside the house in a slow crawl and eventual park. The man that climbed out was clearly Loki.

He was dressed in a long coat, one that reached down to his ankles, but there was a fur trim upon the hems and the boots he wore underneath looked knee-high. There was no denying he was far better dressed for the cold; it was possible he stopped by his family home before visiting the house of Odin, which would explain the delay, but also possible that he had bought a new outfit on arriving to discover

the coldness. Loki looked deathly pale, especially with his long black hair about his shoulders, but he merely paid the driver and walked away.

Thor followed quickly behind him, as he ran across the icy road to catch up. He felt his heart race, as " with every step " Loki got closer and closer to the door, almost within reach of causing a scene and even a scandal for Odin, and it was possible Loki's reputation would suffer for anything and everything he said in such a state. Thor felt obliged to stop him, but for as much his sake as for Odin's. Loki was already at the front door.

"Loki!" Thor broke into an outright run. "Stop!"

A sweat broke out upon him. The back of his throat stung painfully with the cold, so that every breath felt like a fresh burn, and Loki slipped inside before Thor's fingertips could even brush against him. Thor grabbed the door, as it closed behind Loki, and wrenched it open with such force that it slammed against the wall beside it, before he threw himself inside the old house and managed to catch Loki by his upper arm. He clenched tight enough to bruise.

Thor felt grateful that the drawing room was some way off from the entrance; he was able to catch Loki without being seen, enough so that he was able to use all his strength to swing Loki around and throw him forcefully against the wall. He pressed his forearm to Loki's neck, using sheer power alone to keep him in place, while his free hand came up to hold painfully upon the younger man's shoulder. Loki gasped under the pressure, until Thor let loose just enough to enable him to breathe freely, and soon he began to laugh.

"How did you find me so quickly?"

A tear fell down Loki's face. It made him look vulnerable, but not weak by any means. Loki gave a broken smile and let his head roll slightly, as Thor adjusted his position and gripped Loki by his upper arms and pinned him in place against the plaster. They were about an inch from one another. Thor caught the scent of fish and dairy upon Loki's breath, indicating he had eaten not long before, while the shake to Loki's body showed he was still emotional.

"I rang your mother," said Thor.

"My mother? She doesn't even know I'm gone."

"On the contrary." Thor leaned his forehead upon Loki's. "I rang her on the way to collect my passport and credit card; it turns out that your credit cards are under her name, with most of your income coming from her, as such she was able to trace your purchases. I promised her that I would keep you calm, at least until she arrives tomorrow to collect you."

"Oh, you will keep me calm? This I would love to see." Loki began to cry in earnest. "That man in there stole from me what could have been a family! He took your mother from you! Tell me, why should I not shout from the rooftops " right here " for the world to hear?"

"Because you want your revenge to be under your terms."

"I am afraid I do not follow, _Odinson_."

Thor let go of Loki. He dug his hands under the lapel of Loki's coat, enough to lift him an inch off the floor and forced him onto the tips of his toes, and Loki "struggling to keep calm and with fingers digging into Thor's skin for support" looked coldly to him. There was a great deal of anger in those green eyes, but the pain in them was greater still. Thor loosened his grip and let Loki fall back upon his feet, but kept his head pressed against Loki.

"What is it that you want, Loki?"

"What I want is for him to pay for discarding me."

"Aye? Well, I shall not let you ruin his party." Thor breathed deeply. "If you can beat me, feel free to go and do whatever it is that you have planned, Loki. I seriously doubt you are so common as to shout and scream to get the attention you crave, as such you have but two choices: beat your way past me or wait another day. There is no other way."

Loki let out a loud cry of frustration. It was nearly heard over the music and sounds of laughter, where he heard someone from close to the archway "not far down the hallway" ask whether anyone had heard a noise, but Loki soon controlled himself. He threw back his head, enough that it banged painfully upon the wall, and he seemed almost mad for a moment, until the anger burst forth from within him. He pushed against Thor.

The push soon became a series of shoves, then punches, and soon he was hitting aimlessly against Thor's chest with broken and choked sobs. He failed to notice that Thor was also the victim of Odin and Frigga's lies, but Thor said nothing and simply waited for Loki's arms to grow tired and fall lifelessly beside him, and Thor "unable to hold back any longer" pulled Loki against him and embraced him. It was an intimate touch, as they remained locked together in the hallway, and the moment was broken only by Loki's whispered:

"Why couldn't he love me?"

Loki looked up with the pain and anger from before, but there was something else in his expression that was hard to read, and soon Loki angled his head just slightly towards him. Thor felt the warm breath of the other against him. It was difficult to resist; he felt his heart race in a whole new manner, as he leaned down and met Loki halfway, and the kiss that followed was one that made him feel whole again. He needed a distraction as much as Loki.

"Follow me," whispered Thor.

Thor took Loki's hand, before he quickly made his way to the staircase. The drawing room was in eyeshot of the stairs, which forced him to take them at a light run, but no one called out to them and no one seemed to notice them. It took less than a minute to reach the door to Thor's childhood bedroom, where a lightning storm was painted onto the old wood and his name was written large in stylised calligraphy, and Thor dragged them inside.

The room was more embarrassing than he remembered. It was large and

split into two halves, with one half raised on a platform of about an inch. There were shelving units all around, although most seemed filled with stuffed toys and board games, and the posters about the room consisted mostly of hockey players and half-naked women. Loki found enough amusement to break away from his depression, as he muttered about the parts of the women determined to be 'fake', and walked around to examine the room's contents.

Thor glanced down to the rug that was designed in an image of a town, as he remembered playing with his toy cars on that same rug as a child, while Loki poked at a computer whose monitor was anything other than 'flat' and used to support a lamp. The room was dated. It was strange to see a cassette player by the television, which still had an aerial attached to the top, and Loki had apparently found an old 'Pocket Monster' stuffed toy on his bed.

"This is your room?"

"It has been my room since birth," admitted Thor.

"Yet you saw no reason to redecorate?"

Thor rolled his eyes and marched over to him; he snatched the toy from Loki's hands and threw it across the room, before he shoved the younger man down onto the mattress. Loki landed gracefully upon his buttocks, where he braced his weight upon his hands and leaned back, but the smile upon his lips was more than dangerous. It was as if Loki had some of this planned, or at least enjoyed the turn of events, and he patted a space next to him on the 'Power Ranger' duvet set. Thor blushed in embarrassment and sat beside him.

"I moved out when I was eighteen," said Thor. "I have an apartment in the city centre, but it's likely dusty and dirty since I have been in England for some weeks. Hogun also hails from abroad, thus we have both rented an apartment together, but here -? Here is home."

"This is home? I am surprised." Loki looked curious. "It looks like you were an active child; I imagine you had a lot of friends, perhaps you had sleepovers and play-dates, and I envy you for that. My childhood was spent mostly in therapy and in the company of books. You should have seen my room. It could have easily have served as a children's library, but at least I was able to spend time with Mother. She taught me to fight, to cook . . . I felt less alone with her."

"Now that is what I envy you for, Loki. My father was a good man, but he knew not how to socialise with children and seemed drained by my presence. He hired the best tutors for my education, bought the best toys for me to play with, but I rarely saw much of him unless it was to punished or given orders. I was forced to be social; it distracted from my loneliness."

"Did you act out? I'm told I acted out." Loki pulled off his boots and coat. "I blamed my mother for a long while for the fact I had no father, unable to rationalise that it was the fault of Laufey and not hers, and later I blamed myself for his absence."

"If I acted out, my father never mentioned it. I do have issues with anger, however."

"Oh, is that right? I must say that I never noticed."

Loki threw his coat onto his boots, before he climbed onto the bed and leaned back. He was dressed only in dark trousers and a green shirt, but the waistcoat over his chest added a touch of class that made Thor slightly self-conscious. Loki looked to him with half-lidded eyes, before he beckoned to Thor in a way that was far more seductive than it ought, and Thor " as he cast off his jacket and shoes in turn " climbed over next to the younger man.

"Will you reject me this time?" Loki asked.

The question was spoken with a hint of accusation. Thor pulled off his shirt as he sat astride Loki, where he felt the hint of an awakening erection beneath him, and yet the tearstains down Loki's cheek reminded him of the deep pain shared between them. Loki appeared fixated by his bare chest; he was aware of how impressive the muscles looked, as it took great effort in both diet and exercise to maintain them, and yet he felt oddly exposed for the first time in his life. He reached out to take Loki's hand and guided it to his abdomen.

"I need some distraction," muttered Thor.

"I forget that she is your mother, too," said Loki absently. "I think that is why I never told her that I was coming here, as I feared that she would favour you over me. I have images of her ignoring my actions, instead turning to you, and crying as she regains the son she lost."

"We barely know each other, Loki, but I know my 'mother' even less." Thor began to undo the buttons of the other man's waistcoat. "Do you know what angers me most? I am angered by my reaction. I should not feel as indifferent as I do, but I can barely bring myself to care about a woman that cared not about me, and that cannot be normal. I know that I want you, Loki, and I know that I want to forget what I feel. I was wrong to reject you before."

"No, you were perfectly right. If anything, it should be my turn to reject you. You are still in shock, believe me; there will come a time when you will internalise the pain, where you will hate her and then hate yourself, and then you will cry or scream or break. You're right that we barely know one another, but that somehow makes this all the easier, does it not?"

Thor was given no time to answer.

Loki's hand went immediately to Thor's hair; the nails dug deep into his skull, enough to cause great pain and bring back Thor's former anger, and they pulled him down into a deep and passionate kiss. There was the taste of tears, interspersed with bites upon his lip, and Loki's free hand seemed intent on finishing the work that Thor started, as his shirt was soon shrugged off and thrown across the room. He looked every bit as handsome as before.

Thor pulled back enough to look, where he saw a toned body without even the slightest dusting of hair. There was a momentary spark of guilt, as he looked over Loki's half-naked and prone body, and he realised that this act of 'distraction' would also be Loki's act of 'rebellion'. This would not be borne out of lust or love, but simply

a need to use and abuse one another, and Thor knew " even if this led to something more between them " it was not the most appropriate start to any given relationship. He licked his lips hungrily.

There was noise from the party below, enough to bring them both back to reality. Loki looked afraid of anything that might steal Thor's attention; his face paled considerably, as he quickly began to work the belt on Thor's waist, and soon he slid down the trousers to quite low on Thor's legs, exposing him completely. The length seemed imposing to Loki. He gazed upon it with an unreadable expression, before he dug his nails into Thor's forearm and said:

"Make it hurt. Make me feel it."

Thor let out a growl of frustration. He would not cross any lines, but he had no intention of being gentle and felt it strange that Loki would need to ask that, and he made quick work of removing Loki's trousers and underwear in turn. The younger man looked as perfect as he imagined; the erection was slim and long, with a long vein that stood prominent on the underside, and he was uncut and curved just slightly. There was a thatch of neatly trimmed hair, although no trail leading upward, and Loki's hands moved up to clench the headboard.

He held tight onto one of the spindles that ran across, which caused his back to arch perfectly, and Thor " unable to resist the sight " leaned down to kiss Loki. The wrists beneath his hands began to bruise with how hard he held upon them, while he tasted the familiar iron of blood as Loki bit deep upon his lower lip, and he ground down his erection against Loki with a growl of possession. One free hand came down to hold Loki's hip.

"I haven't the lubrication here to ease this," said Thor.

Loki's pale skin was flushed red, while his green eyes were dilated, and he licked his lips and bucked upward to rub against Thor in an almost teasing manner. Thor felt his heart beat wildly upon his chest; he wanted nothing more to take Loki, but not like this and not under these conditions, and so he tried to slow his breathing and control his anger. The skin beneath his callused fingers felt impossibly soft, nothing like the men and women that came before, and he wanted to see it bruised and marked as he left a claim.

"I want you, Loki. I want something of my own."

"I will never be yours," spat Loki. "Even if this becomes a regular occurrence, I am my own person and I will ask you to remember that. Now, take me. Forget the lubrication, Thor! I told you that I want to feel this and feel it I shall. Do not back out now."

"Have you done this before?" Thor's eyes narrowed. "I have, Loki. It can be painful even with correct preparation, but without it can become agony. I want merely to forget my pain; I want a distraction and something to call my own, but you want more than that. If what you want is to bleed than you need to go elsewhere, I will not break you any further."

"Then bruise me, beat me, and bed me. Just do it!"

Thor let out a low growl. He bit the column of Loki's neck before he could rationalise it, leaving a heavy bruise and clear set of teeth marks, and he soon followed by licking and sucking the area to bring out the array of colours that would soon form. Loki cried out, as a hint of pre-come beaded at the tip of his erection. The way Loki writhed made him all the more tempting, especially as he wrapped his legs around Thor and ground instinctively upward, and Thor " unable to resist " bit a small trail of bruises down to his nipple.

The cries that Loki let out could only be described as erotic. Thor let go of his hip, to instead hold their erections against one another, and " as he relished in the heat and slight moisture " he moved them in a regular and comfortable rhythm. He continued to suck and tease Loki, until he pulled away and kissed him once more. It was difficult to maintain. The pleasure between them was building, enough that only stray cries and moans could be heard.

"You " you have to do better than this," hissed Loki.

Thor groaned as the sweat broke over him; he let go of Loki's wrists and instead buried his hand within the other man's hair, as he wrenched back his head until he struggled to breathe, and placed hard bites over the skin of his neck and shoulders. Loki's body began to shake. It was clear he was near to the edge, while his hands came around to clasp Thor's shoulder blades, and soon those nails of his were raking parallel cuts down Thor's skin. The cry of pain that Thor let out seemed to set Loki over the edge. He came.

The way he threw his back looked painful. Legs locked around Thor and pulled him impossibly closer, while his head snapped back and eyes rolled into whites, and ropes upon ropes of come coated their stomachs and became sticky between them. The sight of Loki " soon collapsing, breathless and blushed " was enough to bring Thor to climax, as he felt his body let loose all that it stored. The feeling of ecstasy overwhelmed him.

He fell next to Loki, but the heavy movement jostled the bed and sent a loud bang about the room, one that he prayed wouldn't be heard downstairs. Loki awkwardly adjusted his body to allow the duvet to cover him, before he gestured for Thor to move the same and covered him in turn, and soon they both lay covered in sweat and come beneath the sheets of his childhood. It surprised him when Loki cuddled up behind him; the younger man's arms wrapped around his waist, as he buried his head in the crook of Thor's shoulder, and simply breathed deeply as Thor's back pressed against his chest.

"Do I look like the 'little spoon', Loki?"

"Do I look like I need to be coddled and protected?" Loki hummed distractedly against Thor's ear, which sent a shiver through him that threatened to break the refractory period. "I asked you to hurt me, but you refused to so much as penetrate me. Why?"

"If you want to be hurt so badly, I will do so when it is safe." Thor closed his eyes. "If I took you now, it would do permanent damage and it would have taken advantage of you, but " if you consent " I would be happy to hurt you in other ways and at other times. You are hurt enough for now, Loki. There is no need to add to your pain. I do not understand this need of yours to provoke others and to be abused in turn for your provocations."

"My psychiatrist said that I seek for validation, no matter what its form. Supposedly, I perceive it better to antagonise others and see any future abandonment or abuse happen on my terms, to regain a sense of control, than to risk investing emotionally and having that trust betrayed. It also subconsciously validates my feelings of worthlessness."

"Aye? That is what your doctor thinks, Loki. What do you think?"

"I think I have a slight case of masochism."

Thor laughed deeply. He enjoyed the feeling of being held by Loki, as he struggled to fight back the feeling of betrayal at their parents' actions. Frigga would arrive the following day, which left him with a sickening feeling of dread, while Odin would likely discover them any time once the party had finished. They would need to confront their pasts, but Thor knew neither one of them was ready to do such a thing. It was then Loki gave a sigh.

"You got come on the red power ranger's eye," muttered Loki.

"He was always my least favourite, in any case."

This time, it was Loki's turn to laugh.

5. Chapter 5

****Chapter Five****

'_Thor, I know you are there!'

There came a loud bang from the door. Thor was roused from his sleep; he rolled onto his back and threw out his hand, only to find it colliding with something warm and firm beside him, and "an instant later" there followed a loud groan and a painful kick to his shin. It was difficult to see so late at night, especially when his eyes were unfocussed and filled with sleep at the corners, but soon he remembered just where he was and who was with him.

Loki lay beautifully next to him.

The black hair was splayed about wildly, while the sheets and duvet were pulled up to his chin, and he was curled in on himself like a child in a crib, so that he looked impossibly innocent and fragile. There was a frown upon his face, which did little to ruin the elegance he somehow exuded even in sleep, but it was clear he disapproved of the noises from outside or the fidgeting of Thor as he awoke. The line of bruises upon his neck was visible, and they would be difficult to hide without the aid of a scarf or polo neck.

Thor sat up carefully, as he let the duvet fall to his waist. He reached out to push a stray lock of hair from Loki's face, where he thought he caught a heavy hiss of breath, but Loki remained still and didn't react to the touch. It nearly made Thor laugh, as he leaned down and placed a chaste kiss to the other man's head. There was no doubt in his mind that Loki was pretending to be asleep, perhaps to avoid attention, and he would humour him for now.

"Son, if you do not wake â€œ"

The door opened to reveal the intruder: Odin.

It was difficult to see at first; Thor was forced to raise a hand to shield his eyes, as the light flooded in and caused Loki to huff indignantly, before he rolled forcefully onto his other side and put his back to the rest of the room. Odin watched on in silence. He was dressed in a rather expensive suit of complementary colours, with a perfectly folded handkerchief in the breast pocket. The eye-patch was of a rich gold shade, while his grey hair was loose about his shoulders in a way that reminded Thor too much of Loki in that instant.

"Need I ask who you have brought with you?"

"This is Loki Laufeyson," admitted Thor quietly. "I told you that he had come here to confront you, but what I did not tell you was that we are . . . friends. I had hoped you would have given me the night before searching for me, as I did not expect you so soon."

"Evidently." Odin cast a cold glare to him. "Tell me, Thor, do you bed all your friends in this manner? Is this another behaviour for which to condemn you? I sent you to England to learn responsibility and independence, not to give in to your base desires and claim whatever tawdry ornament caught your eye. You would do better to settle down with one such as Sif, rather than to waste your time with other pursuits. Is this how you choose to live?"

"Aye, it is what I choose, Father. It suits you not to cast aspersions on Loki's character; you have no idea what he has endured or experienced through these years, nor do you know what he is like as a person, and â€œ truth be told â€œ neither do I. I would happily spend my evenings with Loki, learning to understand him, than to cast him aside as you once did."

"You will hold your tongue in my house, boy. You will respect your father."

"I respect you greatly, Father, but I do not agree with you."

"It matters not whether you agree with me."

Odin drew in a deep breath, as his eye moved about the room. There was a sense of sadness and nostalgia there; a small smile broke at the corner of his lips, as he looked over Thor's favourite toys and posters, and â€œ that he had kept Thor's room as a shrine to his childhood â€œ spoke volumes of his love for his only son. Odin eventually looked away, as he nodded in respect to his son and stepped back, and he spoke next with a gentle voice.

"Frigga is here," said Odin. "You will both get dressed."

"Now? She isn't due until tomorrow."

Odin gave them no answer. There was what may have been a tear, but it was soon swept away with a dark frown, and soon the door closed behind him. It cast both men in darkness; Thor climbed reluctantly to his feet and began fishing for items of clothing about the floor,

while Loki groaned and gave a cat-like stretch from the comfort of the bed. The bruises ran all over his body, enough to make Thor feel a stab of guilt, but Loki caught his expression.

The younger man climbed out of bed, without any shame or insecurity regarding his nudity, and cast Thor a look that was equal parts fury and seduction. He took his clothes from Thor's messily held pile, as he began to dress not far beside him. The silence was awkward. Thor detected no pain or soreness from Loki, who wore the bruises with a sense of pride, and he dressed quickly and with great grace, so that he soon looked as if nothing untoward had passed between them. Thor was only half-dressed when Loki asked:

"So your father prefers you with Sif?"

Thor paused to try and ascertain Loki's tone. It was difficult to judge, especially as Loki made it a habit to hide how he felt and to disguise one emotion with the sound of another, but he seemed merely curious in Thor's family dynamics. Thor resumed dressing, until he was fully clothed and no longer looked indecent, and took the opportunity to strip the bedding and pile it at a far corner of the room, where the scent of sweat and sex clung to the material.

"It would not work," said Thor.

"Why is that?" Loki smoothed the furs of his coat. "I have seen Sif many times; I may not be that way inclined myself, but I cannot deny that she is most beautiful. I hear she is highly educated, very talented at her job, and well connected in turn."

"Sif is also my friend. I make it a point never to complicate my friendships; I do not think it impossible that two people should love each other dearly, without wishing to bed one another, as some things can transcend the physical. My father does not understand that, but then look what happened to his marriage. I will not repeat his mistakes."

Loki laughed louder than expected. It was unusual from him, but the sound was beautiful and made Thor smile to hear, and soon he walked over to Thor and placed a hand underneath the other's chin, where he guided his face to directly look upon Loki. The touch was intimate and unassuming; Thor took it as an invitation to intimacy, as he brought Loki into a warm embrace and pressed his lips to Loki's forehead. Loki asked in a soft voice:

"Is this a mistake?"

"No, Loki." Thor gave a small smile. "I think this could be the start of something romantic, but only time will tell whether that can lead into a serious commitment or a parting of ways. I only know that there is no pre-existing friendship here to risk being jeopardised."

"You may think otherwise after the confrontation that awaits below."

"Nothing that your mother or my father say will change that."

Loki gave him a disbelieving look, before he headed towards the door. Thor noticed that his hand lingered, so that his fingertips hung just

an inch from the door handle, and it seemed to take all his strength to open the door and reveal the hallway outside. The house beyond seemed incredibly well-lit; Odin had apparently wanted them to see their way to the lounge, so that " even now Thor was an adult " he still took his son's safety seriously.

They walked in silence downstairs. There soon came the sound of hushed voices in a heated discussion, while shadows played against the wall next to the staircase from the room opposite, and Thor felt Loki freeze on the landing. He ignored him. The sound of a woman's voice was all too familiar, enough to draw Thor onwards, and the voice was so soft and accented just slightly in a way he could not describe, while the emotion in her voice was less expressive and yet somehow more potent than Odin. He felt drawn to her.

Thor barely noticed as his feet led him on, even as his body ran cold and his heart began to race. He came to the foot of the staircase and looked out into the lounge; the woman he saw was beautiful and graceful, clearly aged with time and yet still resembling the person from Loki's photographs, and her blonde hair hung in loose ringlets down her back. There was silence when she turned to see him. It felt awkward and strange until she spoke.

"Thor, my son," whispered Frigga.

Frigga quickly ran over to him and embraced him. The blue hem of her dress skirted the floorboard, while her blue eyes misted over with tears, and she held him so tightly that he thought he would soon lose breath. Odin said nothing and looked down in shame, while Loki walked down the stairs and skirted them with a wide berth, and Thor " seeing Loki's expression so similar to Odin's " realised that he felt rejected and neglected.

"It has been so long," whispered Frigga.

Thor pulled away gently, although he let his hand linger upon hers. He turned away and walked over to Loki, whom he took by the arm and led him inside the drawing room, and " as they sat " he let out a long breath that he never realised he held. The air felt cold. There was an almost imperceptible tremor to Loki's arm, so subtle that no one would notice to look at him, and yet Thor sensed already that the younger man felt rejected by all attention being upon Thor and not himself, but there was little that could be done to ease his insecurity.

There was little noise from within or without the home; a faint sound of classical music could be heard playing on the stereo hidden away, while there was a scent of liquor in the air and a small tumbler of whiskey near his father's seat, and " from the fireplace " there came the soft crackles of wood snapping in the heat. Odin took a seat beside the fireplace, as he leaned forward and nursed his glass, while Frigga came to sit on a seat just next to Thor.

"You abandoned me," said Thor coldly.

"I had no choice, Thor." Frigga took his hands in hers. "Laufey would not cease with his rumours and lies; it grew to a point where we risked losing both of you, while your father's company began to fail, and there would have been nothing left to leave either of you. If we stayed as we were, there would have been no family left to

protect."

"You were my mother!" Thor pulled his hands away. "You were supposed to love me unconditionally, not leave me to raise another! How did you make such a choice? What made you pick Loki over me? I thought you were dead all this time, but the truth is much worse."

"Thor, there was no other way. Your father felt it best that Loki be given to another foster family, which would protect his business and give Loki into a good home, but I had an emotional attachment to him as strong as the one I had to you. I would rather die than to hurt either of my children. Loki had been abandoned once, what would happen to him should he be abandoned again? I would not leave him, which meant that I needed to leave you."

There was a small smile from Loki. It was broken and hard to decipher, but Thor suspected that there was a spark of happiness at having come before another, and it was a devastating thing to realise that his childhood had been so traumatic that even the smallest of kindnesses felt like the world to him. Odin and Loki said nothing during the exchange, as both merely listened in on the conversation between mother and son, but Thor already felt close to tears and the familiar rage in his chest. The anger would not abate.

"You could have stayed in contact," argued Thor.

"It was difficult," replied Frigga. "We thought it would complicate matters; it would be easy to believe as you do now, that I loved Loki more, or for Loki to believe I was unable to let go as I preferred for you. We decided to break all contact; that way neither of you would grow to feel inferior to the other. It was a part of the terms of our divorce. That divorce â€" in turn â€" was what enabled me to buy Laufey's silence, as well as to gain full guardianship."

"I was told that you were dead! Do you think that lie better than the truth? If you thought a child incapable of understanding, you could easily have told the teenager. I am an adult now, but you still thought it best not to say a word to me? You could have approached me at any time, yet you chose not to visit me, and that is hard to forgive."

"I was not aware of what your father told you, Thor." Frigga knelt down beside him. "Your father and I have been in contact over the years, while our relationship is complicated indeed, but I never discussed Loki and he never discussed you. I thought you knew."

"You still could have spoken to me. You could have called me."

"Contact a child I thought could not forgive me?"

The expression that Frigga wore was devastating, and â€" against all his better reason â€" Thor felt a sharp sense of guilt. He felt Loki move beside him, as he sat with legs apart and hands clasped between them, and the way that Loki hunched over made it seem as if he sought to hide himself away from the situation. Thor felt a cold wave wash over him, as he remembered just what they had done a few hours previous, and he pulled away instinctively from Frigga and ran a hand over his face. The dread was overwhelming.

"Loki's adoption . . . was it ever completed?"

Loki looked towards Thor at the question. Thor felt the other's body tense and move, while the room became deathly silent for the briefest of moments, and Odin " silent until that moment " stood and let the light from the fire be blocked by his frame. It cast a shadow over them all, so that Thor felt almost like a child in the presence of his father, but Loki appeared to not be intimidated in the least and kept an observant eye upon them.

"What do you mean by that, Thor?" Odin asked.

"Loki and I were under the assumption there was no familial ties between us," said Thor. "I remember that Loki said he was adopted, but if that is true . . . what has passed between us would be a crime. I thought Frigga gained guardianship, not parental rights."

"There was no formal adoption," admitted Frigga. "Loki was our foster child, Thor, but when I left " during the divorce and all that followed " Laufey gave me legal guardianship and nothing more, as he insisted on retaining some rights to the boy that was his blood. He visited on rare occasions, but his participation in raising Loki was . . . minimal."

"You mean non-existent," spat Loki. "He was never there."

"Yet you never wanted for love."

Loki scoffed and rolled his eyes. The gesture garnered a cold look from Odin, who stepped forward toward them, but Frigga moved to sit on the arm of the sofa beside Loki, where she gently placed a hand upon his shoulder. He shrugged her away, but " as saddened as she seemed by his sudden distance " she allowed him his space with a fragile smile. Thor wanted nothing more than to reach out to Loki in turn, but he knew Loki would not appreciate it.

"Am I to forgive you?" Loki asked.

"What forgiveness do you seek?" Odin asked. "This was a woman that left her husband and son for you, that gave all the money she had to obtain guardianship of you, and that showered you with more love than any other in your position could hope to gain. You were meant to die that day when Laufey abandoned you, but Frigga gave you life."

"Aye, and what life that was! You could have fought for me, but instead you threw me away much like Laufey did . . . tell me, Odin, why I was so worthless to you. What was so wrong with me that you could sacrifice a wife so as not to be saddled with a monster like me?"

"Loki," whispered Frigga. "Do not talk about yourself in such a manner."

"Why should I not? Is any of what I say a lie?"

There were tears again in Loki's eyes, but he fought them back. Thor recognised the expression as one he had seen a lot in the past few days, so much so that he knew what Loki needed most was a way to express his rage and not a means to discuss it, and those modes of

expressions were few and far between when his canvasses were left at home. Thor stood and noticed " for the first time " a glass of whiskey not far from that of his father's, and he wondered whether his parents had ever fully ended their relationship.

"Perhaps we should call it a night," said Thor.

"I haven't seen you in nearly twenty years," said Frigga sadly. "You would go to bed now? I had hoped to hear about your life, perhaps your plans for the future, and get to know my son better in the process. The night is still young and it was such a long trip for us all."

"I will leave the choice to Loki, but I do not think there is anything either of you could say that would change the situation. I need time to process this. Perhaps, come morning, we can discuss this openly with fresh minds and with time to calm down, but for now all I wish to do is to think and to feel and to plan. You forget that Loki has suffered also."

"Come now, was it any surprise that they forgot?" Loki asked.

Loki stood to follow Thor, but Frigga caught his hand and held him steady. The way she rose was beautiful and graceful, while the way she held Loki's face between her hands was familial and maternal, and Thor felt a stab of anger that he had missed all those years of love, all due to his parents' inability to compromise on matters. Loki's face flushed, as he looked to Thor with what appeared to be a hint of embarrassment, but Frigga soon forced him by his chin to look her directly in her eyes. He gave a hiss of breath and narrowed his gaze.

"Loki, you are being unfair." Frigga placed a kiss to his forehead. "Tomorrow, we will all talk and I promise that Odin and I will listen to your every word. Do not forget that it has been so long since I last saw Thor, so it is not favouritism that draws me to him, and you have always been my priority throughout these years. You are my son, Loki."

"Just not legally, it seems," muttered Loki.

Frigga let go with a sigh of her own, while Thor gently took Loki by the crook of his arm and walked him to the archway into the corridor. He ignored the way his father's hands clenched upon his arms, as if he could barely contain his frustration at seeing the two men together, but he said nothing and let them make their way away from the drawing room. Thor paused to turn and address his parents, but Loki " with nothing left to say " marched away and immediately made his way upstairs, and Thor was left to speak alone.

"We will speak to you in the morning," said Thor.

"Okay. Goodnight, my son," said Frigga.

6. Chapter 6

Chapter Six

Thor stumbled into the kitchen.

It offered a surreal sight: Odin and Frigga. They looked almost familial and friendly, as Frigga poured Odin some tea fresh from the teapot, and she moved about the kitchen with a familiarity that spoke of someone well versed with its contents. There was no hesitation in her movements; she knew where the mugs and spoons were kept despite Odin's remodelling just some months previous, and a part of him suspected that they had remained in touch.

Odin sat at the kitchen table, centre of the room, where he wore a long nightshirt that fell to his ankles and gave him an oddly regal appearance. It was nothing that arouse suspicion, except for the fact that Frigga wore the same dress from the night before, and Thor felt his chest swell with a held breath that he could not quite release. The sting of betrayal felt deeper than before. It was one thing for Frigga to leave without contact, but somehow it felt worse that she could choose to be in Odin's life and yet not his life. Thor clenched his fists.

"Ah, Thor," said Odin. "Will Loki be joining us?"

Thor looked to Frigga, who sat gracefully next to her ex-husband. There were slight bags to her eyes, as if she had not slept well at all, but she still retained a great deal of beauty and smiled in such a way that it lit up her face. There was a small bowl of fruit before her, while Odin appeared to have opted for a freshly fried breakfast, and Thor knew " at a mere glance " that Frigga was the one that must have cooked for him. It looked delicious, enough that he wondered what it would have been like to grow up with her food.

He finally let out his breath and sat opposite them. The clothes in his father's home were far too small for him, as such he sat bare-chested and only in the trousers from the night before, and he realised that he was still in need of a shower and breakfast. He felt tempted to reach out for some of the various breakfast foods that littered the table, but he could not bring himself to touch anything made or prepared by Frigga. He ignored the food completely.

"Loki has left," said Thor.

"What do you mean by that?"

Thor reached into his pocket. He pulled out a crumpled piece of paper, written in what was Loki's handwriting, and slid the message across the table to his father. Frigga leaned over to read her son's words, while her smile fell just slightly and sadness passed across her blue eyes, and " for a moment " he felt a stab of pity for her. Frigga reached out to let her fingers brush against the paper and brought it over to her; Odin simply gave a short grunt and shook his head, as he poked at the beans upon his plate and muttered a small curse.

"So he has gone already," muttered Odin.

"I am not surprised," said Frigga. "Loki has always been one that seeks to attack his problems, whether that be directly or insidiously through manipulation, and " for which I am most grateful " there was no confrontation yesterday to be had, which means he has likely retreated to gather his thoughts. It is better this way. He needs time to process this."

"It doesn't worry you that Loki is now alone?" Thor asked. "This is a man that has expressed suicidal ideation, that has expressed anger bordering on homicidal towards Laufey, and that has been confronted with a life-altering truth! He needs supervision, not solitude!"

"I have raised that boy since he was a child, Thor. Trust me when I say that I know him best; Loki responds best when he feels he has control, which is why he often resorts to manipulative behaviour, and when he is directly confronted he will lash out due to fear and a feeling of powerlessness. He often retreats into his own world, or will stand on the outskirts of a group, as he begins to feel claustrophobic and panicked without space."

Thor thought hard about what was said. It was clear that Loki's behaviour was learned from Frigga, who he still suspected as having arranged everything so they would learn the truth, but to confront her would be to offend Odin. The weather outside was marginally better than that of England, but the cold penetrated the kitchen and made him feel overly aware of his underdressed state, and he distracted himself by making a cup of coffee. The cup warmed his hands and gave him something to hold, as he sat back down.

"I do not know him as well as you, that is true," admitted Thor. "I simply think that he is prone to acting without truly grasping the effect his actions have upon others, only able to presume so much before his plans fail him. He feels abandoned and neglected, he believes himself inferior to his brothers and to me, and what will he do to get your attention? It would be best that I follow him as soon as possible. He should not be alone."

"At least wait just an hour before you go, Thor," begged Frigga. "I can guarantee you that Loki will be okay, but â€" if it worries you â€" I can have someone meet him at the airport. There is a young woman that I know quite well, enough that I cannot imagine Ms Foster refusing such a request. Come, Thor, it has been so many years since I last saw you."

"This woman is one that he knows well? He will not feel afraid or ashamed that she has been asked to watch over him? If you think it appropriate, I will agree to stay for so long as this Foster can stay with Loki in turn, but I must go by the evening. I will not stay longer."

"Even just a day is more than I could have hoped."

Frigga reached out to touch his hand, but the touch felt strange. It was hard to accept such an intimate touch from one he could barely recall, a such he felt tense and held an urge to pull away, but he held strong and remembered that his perception was different to hers. He did not wish to cause offence, while clearly Frigga sought for reassurance and forgiveness, and so â€" with a sigh â€" he let his hand turn to squeeze hers gently. She smiled brightly.

"Excuse me for a moment," said Frigga.

There was a shuffle of movement, as Frigga stepped away and retrieved her phone from the counter of the kitchen, before she left the room and cheerfully greeted someone named 'Darcy' on the other end of the line. Thor waited until she left, before he looked to his father and

observed him carefully in the ensuing silence. He had learnt a lot in his exile into England, especially during his time in Loki's company, and he knew to be careful what he said next out of fear of disrespecting his father or causing offence.

"Are you both still an item?" Thor asked.

Odin shot Thor a stern look. He watched as his father placed down his knife and fork, while he reached out with an indecipherable expression for his glass of water, and Thor suspected " through his silence " that he was analysing the situation and thinking of what to say next. It was difficult to endure the silence and to keep his cool, especially when he felt his heart race and the familiar anger boil within him, but Thor waited as patiently as possible.

"I do not see why that is any concern of yours," said Odin.

"That woman is my mother!" Thor slammed his hand upon the table. "You told me that she was dead, so I spent my life grieving for her instead of forming a relationship with her, but now I see that she may have remained in your life. You hid her from me."

"Our relationship is a difficult one, Thor. You do not fall out of love with someone simply because they have left your life, which is the case with your mother. I would gladly give my life for her, while I can envision no life without her, and I still greatly respect her opinion in all matters of business and life in general. We have but one rule, which is never to discuss you or Loki or the divorce. It would not serve to complicate matters."

"So you sneak away on your visits to England to see her?" Thor clenched his fist. "Clearly, she is used to our home and spends time here in Iceland. You knew where she was all this time, yet you kept her from me and denied me any knowledge of her, and even all photographs were kept from me. Do you care about this betrayal?"

"I will not be made to feel guilty for protecting you. You are my son and my heir; it is the duty of a father to protect those in his charge, as such I hid from you the truth of your mother's departure. What good would it have done to know she left you?"

"Surely that was my choice to " "

Frigga returned to the room.

The smile on her face seemed somewhat forced, but she placed the phone down gently and with a quiet reassurance that Loki would be safe with her acquaintance. It was difficult to thank her, for the anger that raced through him threatened to bleed out, but he managed to utter out a brief word of gratitude despite his rage. He kept his eyes locked upon Odin, unable to look away despite being sickened by his father's actions, and eventually the tension between them seemed so palpable that Frigga sensed it clear as day.

"I see things are still tense between you," said Frigga.

Odin heaved a long sigh, as he pushed his food away from him. He stood quickly and walked out of the room; it was a habit of Odin's to say his piece and walk away, so much so that he effectively exiled Thor when his anger caused him to lash out verbally and nearly

physically at his father. It felt surreal to be left alone in a room with Frigga, but " with a sigh of her own " she seemed to express a familiarity with Odin's actions. Thor smiled despite himself.

"He is a good father, I swear," said Thor.

"Of that, I have no doubt." Frigga smiled warmly. "I remember the legends of old that he would tell you, of frost giants and ancient gods, and how you would hang on his every word. He was your hero. I often wondered how much harder that must have made growing up for you, as there is no greater disappointment than discovering that one's heroes are only human."

"He says that you do not talk of me or Loki. That means you do not know what I did to be sent to work in England, correct?" Thor watched as Frigga nodded. "I have problems with my temper and with spontaneity. Father is " indeed " my hero, enough that I would have done anything that I thought would win his favour, which includes that of harming what I thought were his enemies and those that would harm him. I had no limits.

"I often fought with Loki's brothers; Bǫleistr inherited what little was left of Laufey's lot, building a company that rivalled that of my father's, and " while both have other businesses " it angered me that Bǫleistr would set up one in direct competition with my father. He even hired on Laufey in some capacity that I soon forget, which made me doubt the legitimacy of how he ran his businesses. I could not get to him directly, however. Bǫleistr is built like a house, with great strength and a large entourage, and he is not afraid to get the law involved.

"It is why I focussed my revenge upon Helblindi. He is teaching in some American university, but returned home for the holidays. He is slight and built considerably like Loki, and " now I think about it " there is an uncanny resemblance between the two . . . I can see why you would not want to raise Loki in the same city. It must have been difficult to move."

"The difficulty was in leaving you, Thor," said Frigga.

Her words were soft and sincere, but somehow felt like a lie upon her lips. Thor looked to her and wondered what she must think of him, especially now that so many years had passed and he had become something that she must be ashamed to call a son, and yet no shame seemed to flicker upon her expression. He listened as his father played some music in the room next door, while a fire began to crackle and come alive with a cacophony of sounds, and he realised that he missed life with his family and friends back in his native land.

"I thought size equalled weakness," admitted Thor.

"That is a mistake many have made." Frigga leaned backward. "I have taught Loki self-defence from an early age, while he has also had lessons from other instructors, and I can safely say that many have thought him an easy mark and come off worse for wear."

"I learnt that lesson myself with Helblindi. He was forced into a bar to celebrate something or other regarding Bǫleistr, but he was hunched over in a corner booth with a book that looked unbearably

boring. It was as if he thought himself better than everyone else. I walked up to him and told him that I objected to his brother's latest venture, but he ignored me and told me that he had no time to speak to fools. I asked him to say it again, so he did."

Thor flexed his hand into a fist. It was as if he could feel the flesh upon his knuckles, while the memory of flesh blood hit him hard, and he felt both a mixture of shame and horror at what he had done that night not too long ago. The sounds and screams would be forever etched on his mind, while he felt lucky that his friends had been there to drag Bǫleistr from him after the man pounced in defence of his brother, and he knew he would never be able to show his face in that bar again. Thor let his hand fall and heaved a sigh.

"I broke his jaw," admitted Thor.

There was a long silence, until Frigga sipped her tea and looked over to him. The expression she wore was filled with sadness, so that lines appeared upon the corners of her eyes and mouth, and whatever she felt aged her beyond her years. It forced him to look away, as he tried to focus on the scent of the coffee and feeling of the warm mug on the palm of his hand, and he knew that his father was right to send him away. Frigga asked quietly:

"Do you wish me to say I'm disappointed?"

"I only wish for you to know I am not what you think I am," said Thor. "I am no longer the boy that played with plastic swords and in wooden forts, but instead a man that must prove his worth by keeping a clean record in a country he cannot comprehend. I do not know what it is that Loki sees in me, but I know that I feel some attraction for him, too."

"I cannot claim to be pleased by that, as â€" in my eyes â€" you will always be brothers, but you spent barely a year together as children and there is no blood between you. I simply ask that you realise Loki believes himself incapable of being loved . . . it will be a challenge, Thor."

Frigga stood up to take her empty cup away. The way she moved spoke of resignation; he saw that her footsteps were heavy, while her shoulders were hunched and her head low, and her skin seemed paled compared to what it previously looked. Frigga stood beside the sink, where she began to wash the cup with an awkward distraction. Thor found her behaviour curious. He stood up and followed her over to the other side of the kitchen, where he waited beside her and watched the way she stared into the water with an otherworldly gaze.

"He will doubt you at every turn," said Frigga.

"I cannot blame him." Thor looked away. "Laufey abandoned him. He was taken by a woman that claimed to be his biological mother, only to find out that she had unofficially adopted him, and all that time he has suffered I know not what. Now he will likely reach out to Helblindi and Bǫleistr, which I fear more than anything. They may welcome him with open arms, for they will surely remember him, but what will that mean for us?"

"If you fear losing Loki, you fear for yourself. You must be

selfless, Thor. If it comes to be that he finds a new family in his brothers, you must embrace that, as he is not the sort to cut ties with those he loves simply to make room for another. He would also not betray you, even if he would be tempted to betray Odin . . . he loathes Laufey more than you know."

"You make it sound a chore to love him, then praise him in the same breath."

"Nothing you enjoy is a 'chore' or 'work', Thor. I love Loki dearly, as such I will do everything in my power to make him happy, but you must realise the emotional toll such a love will have upon you. If you miss but one call, he will wonder whether you have been in some accident or have instead decided he is too unimportant to answer. If you say that you love him, he will answer that he already knows or will make a joke about such a love."

Her words rang true. Thor remembered how Loki had whispered to him the previous night; it seemed that he had bared his soul and talked of respect for Thor, before sarcastically asking for a kiss and pulling a face, and Thor " knowing no different " laughed at what he thought to be nothing but a joke. He wondered how often Loki teased or lied to hide his feelings, perhaps using humour to separate himself from those around him, and it was hard to reconcile the jester with the same man that could fly into dangerous rages.

The sound of running water distracted him, enough that he turned to watch as Frigga attended to domestic duties that he rarely saw Odin do in turn, and he wondered how difficult it must have been for his father when she left. It explained why his father hired cleaners instead of tidying himself, especially if he had come to expect such behaviour from his wife, and yet Frigga seemed to enjoy these small distractions. She asked him gently:

"Does a man with anger have such patience?"

It was a difficult question to answer. Thor wondered whether he could deal with his problems along with Loki's, as it would be easy to exacerbate each other's weaknesses, but Loki fascinated him both physically and emotionally. He looked to Frigga and wondered how different his life would have been with her presence, but " more than that " he felt grateful that Loki had a mother that knew how best to deal with him. Thor smiled sadly.

"I cannot give up on Loki," said Thor. "Not now."

"Then he is lucky to have you as a friend." Frigga smiled. "Just promise me that you will not let things go too far; if you feel that you must leave him, it will be better to do it sooner than later. He will not endure such a rejection so late into a relationship."

"You can trust me to treat him with kindness, of this I swear this."

"If you believe that to be true, I will believe you in turn."

Frigga reached out and brought Thor into a warm embrace; the touch caused him to stiffen and feel riled, as he forced himself to remember that this was no presumptive stranger, but he still felt enough resentment to dislike this sudden intimacy. It felt ill

earned, but he held his tongue when she pulled back and he saw the tears in her eyes.

"Now, tell me about your life."

Thor smiled and spoke.

7. Chapter 7

Chapter Seven

Loki worked tirelessly at the canvas.

It was fascinating to watch, as his methods varied so much from Thor. He worked barely dressed, in nothing but an old paint-stained shirt and loose trousers, and seemed to throw paint in a way that looked erratic and random to an outsider perspective. There was a slowly emerging pattern, which showed there was method to Loki's madness, but his expression was so angry and passionate that he looked lost to all reason. He focused only on his art.

Thor leaned against the doorframe; the towel around his neck absorbed the moisture from his hair, while his bare chest felt icy cold in the old house, and he wondered whether Loki had even noticed him half-naked in the doorway of the studio. The music that played was impossibly loud, so that he could hear nothing except the old composers that echoed about from the stereo system, and he was relieved that Loki's home was detached enough that the neighbour's would have no cause to complain. Thor moved to the stereo and turned it down.

"Your mother rang again, Loki," said Thor.

The paintbrush stilled for a brief moment. Loki didn't so much as look away from his work, but he did throw the brush to the ground and reached out with his hands instead, as he began to pick paint from the palette and used his fingers to continue. He seemed to pale at the news, but he otherwise showed no indication that he heard what Thor said. Thor walked behind him and placed both hands upon Loki's shoulder, where he gently massaged the tense muscles.

"I think you mean _our_ mother," said Loki.

"Loki, it has been two weeks." Thor placed a kiss to his neck. "I can understand your resentment about the situation, but you must realise this changes nothing in regards to my feelings for you. There is no blood between us and no legal ties. We are not brothers."

"I am glad you find this so easy to process, but we cannot all be as mature as the great and mighty Thor." Loki drew in a harsh breath. "Frigga replaced my biological mother, without even telling me that the deed had been done, like some reverse cuckoo in another's nest. I grew up with the name 'Fã¸rbauti' a complete abstract, never knowing her face or aware of the gift she gave me. I wonder whether my other mother would forgive me."

"If you had not snuck away in the night, you would have heard Frigga explain the following morn, Loki, but â€" as it stands â€" you do not have to continue living in ignorance of the one that borne you.

Frigga has received many photographs and heirlooms from Helblindi and Bǫleistr, if only you would go to her and retrieve them. Frigga is still your mother."

"She is my mother as much as Odin is my father."

"You do not mean that."

Loki leaned back against Thor, who wrapped his arms around him. It was an intimate pose, but he could feel that Loki was cold from his time spent working barely dressed in such an old and draughty room. The house was now almost complete in its renovations, but only so much could be done in a listed building to keep out the winter weather, and so Loki was forced to endure the chill. The younger man let his hands rest upon Thor's forearms and rested his head on Thor's shoulder, as he looked upwards with a sorrowful smile.

"Do you talk to her often?" Loki asked.

"We talk once a day," admitted Thor. "I call her as soon as I have finished talking with Father, although some days we have had conversations together. Father disagrees with my decision to move in with you, as he thinks it is too early for a commitment."

The expression that Loki wore was indecipherable. He appeared puzzled, as his eyes swept across the room and took in everything that he saw, and it was almost as if he were analysing every item and every angle, as if he could somehow spot some magical change that would either confirm or deny Thor's claim. Eventually, he stopped to let out a low hiss of breath and his hands clenched hard upon Thor's arms. Loki asked quite firmly:

"You have moved into my home?"

Thor laughed and placed kisses along Loki's neck, but carefully avoided the bruises that marked the otherwise perfect skin. There were also bruises upon his back, along with red marks that were raised and sore, but they were the result of carefully picked candles and objects that were virtually guaranteed to leave no permanent damage. They criss-crossed the skin of Loki's back in a way that was almost art in itself, and " had Thor's murals taken an abstract turn like Loki's work " he would have loved to have patterned his art around them.

"You genuinely haven't noticed?" Thor asked.

"I am a busy man, Thor," said Loki. "In case you haven't noticed, I have a gallery to run and art to create. I do not have time to pay much attention to your comings and goings. That being said, as much as I am loath to admit this, your father is right by far. Two weeks and you have moved your belongings into my home? You are a hopeless romantic."

"I was worried about you." Thor held tighter. "You trashed your room and fled to Iceland, all to confront a man you barely knew over the news you were adopted, and then fled yet again back to England to avoid talking to your mother about such matters. I was afraid."

"Afraid of what? That I would take my life? I will admit to having

given the matter some thought, but " right now " I am quite happy to throw myself into my art. If you are here as part of a suicide watch, I would advise you not to get too settled, as I certainly do not wish to commit myself to someone that I have dated for roughly a fortnight at most. It is as I say: you are a hopeless romantic, Thor. What if this relationship fails?"

"If it fails, I return to Iceland." Thor smiled against Loki.

"It says a lot that you must put a sea between us."

Thor laughed and gently turned Loki around. There was paint all over the younger man, so that it rubbed against Thor and dirtied his skin, and he knew that the shower he took would now be considered a waste of time. He briefly remembered the night before, where Loki wanted the focus of his art to be the human body itself, and the mess that came from the paints thrown over them and the sheet laid upon the floor. He smiled at the thought.

He breathed in the scent of Loki's hair, as he placed kiss to his partner's neck. The night no longer felt so cold as before, although he could hear the wind howl from outside and saw the moonlight stream in through the window, and " from somewhere below " he heard the familiar sound the phone ringing for attention. It felt good to be away from Iceland, where he could ignore his father and focus on his work to distract him, but the moments alone with Loki reminded him of the betrayal they shared. To distract himself, he asked quietly:

"What is it that you're painting?"

Loki turned to look upon his work; the canvas was mostly filled with blacks and greens on one side, but reds and yellows upon the other, and it appeared almost like two landscapes colliding together on one canvas. It was beautiful, but surreal and abstract. Loki pulled back just enough to run a paint-soaked hand through his hair, as he observed the painting in a strangely distant sort of way, before he gave something like a smirk.

"A fresh start," said Loki.

"Do you hold hope for a new beginning?"

"It is difficult to move forward with the past holding you back," whispered Loki. "Let us just say that I plan to be a better parent than either of those that raised me, and I would rather die than let Laufey play a part in the life of any child I may have. I will love them."

"I am sure they would love you, too. I know I could fall in love with you."

"You really are a sentimental fool."

Thor gently reached out to take Loki's face in his hands, before he pulled the young artist into a warm " yet somewhat chaste " kiss. He caught an all too familiar taste, where he felt the hitch of breath and the beginning of tongue, but he pulled away before it could become anything deeper or more passionate. They both knew that what Loki needed was a cathartic release, one that came from his art

or from talking to another, but Loki was always so reluctant to talk and his art was all that was left. Loki pulled back and said coolly:

"My problems cannot be fixed with a kiss, Thor."

"No, but perhaps it may ease them."

"As a distraction? Perhaps."

Thor pulled Loki into a warm embrace, as he felt Loki laugh in his hold. He dared not mention Loki's apparent good humour; it would only cause Loki to retreat, especially when he was already in such a fragile state, but Loki was slowly beginning to show more and more of his true self. It was possible that there was a future for them yet, with Loki coming into his own and finding his place within the world, and Thor knew he would support him through it.

"I wish to contact Helblindi," whispered Loki.

The words were stern enough to indicate resolution, but there was also something fragile behind them that spoke of reluctance, and Thor ran his hands through Loki's hair gently in an attempt to soothe him. Loki frowned and rolled his eyes, as he pulled away Thor's hand and turned back to his work with a hint of frustration. He observed the canvas intently. It was as if he saw what Thor could not, for at once his hands began to reach for paint and began to work their magic over the canvas, and it was almost hypnotic to watch.

"You think it foolish to speak to him," said Loki.

"I said no such thing." Thor stepped back to give Loki space. "I expected that you might wish to speak to your brothers; they are innocent in this, just as much as you are, but that does not mean I will ever come to like them or respect them. Helblindi in particular is . . . difficult."

"You mean that he is an intellectual that refuses to humour your insults? I can see why that would be a form of contention between the two of you." Loki smirked over his shoulder. "I contacted Laufey about my unofficial adoption, Thor. He laughed off my concerns and refused to provide any real explanations, but he took great pleasure in telling me what you did to my brother, apparently enough to pray you visit the same injuries upon me."

Thor felt the familiar stab of anger. It infuriated him that Laufey could gossip about his past scandals to others, but it made him beyond livid that Laufey would wish such harm upon his youngest son and bully him in that same breath. There was something sacred in the relationship between parents and children, enough that one came to expect an unconditional love as per course, but Laufey appeared to break all rules of nature. He was an abomination to the human race. Thor reached out to knead Loki's shoulders.

"Your father is a monster," spat Thor. "There was a time when I would have wished to wipe his kin from the earth, but now I would settle for teaching him a lesson that he would not soon forget. I will not hurt you. At least, I would never do anything that you did not wish to happen, and nothing more than I think you could endure. You are safe with me, I promise."

"Hmm, Bǫleistr said much the same. We remained in some loose contact over the years, but both Laufey and Frigga forbade too much contact, as they were afraid he would reveal too much about the truth of my birth. He calls once a year upon my birthday, but sends gifts for every holiday and occasionally emails or letters just for the sake of keeping in touch. I am told that you keep your belongings in good condition, as such I am safe."

"This is why I hate Bǫleistr. He is nothing but a monster in human skin; ignore whatever he says about me, Loki, as I treat my friends like family and my lovers with respect. You are not property to me; you are my partner and my friend. Ignore what that creature says!"

"I do believe it is worth contact with him just to see your reactions."

"Be warned that he is a liar and a brute."

Loki laughed and turned around. He reached up to touch Thor's cheek, where he smeared a great deal of green paint over his skin, and he let his thumb trace a pattern upon Thor's lip. It left a bitter taste, as the paint was absolutely all over him, but Thor ignored it and kept his eyes locked upon his lover's, who seemed intent on annoying him and teasing him.

"Now who does _that_ remind me of?"

"I do not lie, Loki. Never."

There came another sound of a phone ringing, which broke Thor's concentration and caused him to walk away from Loki. The phone stopped ringing no sooner did he reach the doorframe, although his mobile rang from deep within his pocket, and "as he removed the device with a frown" he spotted the name 'Darcy' upon the screen and cursed Loki for having given the woman his number in what seemed like petty revenge. Thor turned and showed the flashing screen to the now laughing artist at his work.

"Why does this woman keep calling me?"

"Ah, well, you told my mother I should not be left alone." Loki waved a hand vaguely. "I was greeted by Jane Foster at the airport; I will not deny she is an interesting person, but hardly someone that I wish to spend a great deal of time with. I think she was quite taken with you when you came dashing into my house, intent on rescuing me from some unknown fate."

"Aye, but this is not Jane, Loki." Thor cancelled the call. "I have been in touch with Jane since. She is a good woman and will perhaps become a good friend, but this person is one that I suspect you gave my number as punishment for having chased after you."

"Punish you? I am a grown man, one that sought to confront his step-father alone and without an unnecessary chaperone, and I see no reason why I should resent the man that took it upon himself to chase me down like an unaccompanied minor, all because he could not trust me. In any case, Darcy is Jane's assistant and a friend of mine. I thought you might enjoy the invitations to various apps. It is social

media, after all, and you are quite social."

"I see your good humour has returned, at least, but I appreciate this not."

"Has anyone ever told you Shakespearean English is out of fashion?"

Thor paused where he stood, out of fear that he would lash out, and so took a moment to collect himself and ignore the blatant insult to his person. He knew that Loki was insulting him to distract him from the problem at hand, as if he would forget about Darcy and her calls simply because Loki had provided him with a new insult to deal with, and instead he shoved his phone against Loki's chest. Loki was forced to fumble to hold it, lest it fall, while Thor made his way back to the hallway and tried to remind himself to be patient.

"Two weeks and I already tire you?" Loki asked. "I am barely surprised."

"You will not push me away, Loki. I am here to stay."

"We'll see. They are always there to stay . . ."

Thor said nothing, even as he thought of Laufey and Odin, both of whom had set a precedent in Loki's life for a lack of trust in those around him. He knew he could not walk away with Loki thinking he had 'won' such an argument, as for Loki to win this time would mean for him to believe that Thor was the next in a long line of people to abandon him. Thor instead paused before leaving and said with a forced smile:

"I will never leave you. I swear upon my life."

"I guess we'll just have to see, won't we?"

8. Chapter 8

****Chapter Eight****

"Barkeep! Another!"

Thor smashed his glass upon the floor. The entirety of the pub seemed to turn and stare, so that " through his intoxicated gaze " he felt a sting of self-consciousness. He noticed Jane quickly stand to her feet, signalling something to the bartender and slipping him what looked like a twenty, before she sat back down and cast him a dark glare. It was difficult to bear, as he disliked causing offence to those that had shown him respect, and he smiled weakly.

There was a hearty laughter from Volstagg just to his right, while Sif let out a hiss of breath that sounded almost like a warning to Thor, and soon the noise of the pub began to continue, so that Thor's mistake was forgotten like any other drunken display. A waitress came by to sweep up the mess, while the radio played in the background some song that he couldn't quite understand with the speed of the English used. The room as a whole had the stench of stale alcohol, and Thor disliked how sticky the floor felt underfoot, but he ignored it well.

"Thor, can you not do that again?"

Thor looked around for the source of the voice. The booth was rounded, with an equally round table within it, and it fitted the six of them well. Jane sat opposite him upon the edge of the bench, where the red faux-leather pealed and ripped in places, with her glass of beer before her still mostly full. The condensation upon the glass was oddly fascinating, perhaps another sign that he was no longer sober, but her expression soon stole his attention. Jane had been good enough to keep watch over Loki, as well as proved to be a good friend since.

He felt his smile fall slightly, as a sting of shame washed over him. The behaviour he exhibited was not one his friends had called him out upon, at least not to his face that he was aware about, but clearly Jane was offended. He noted the anger that marred her otherwise beauty, as she pushed back a stray lock of brown hair, and she pulled at the collar of her shirt to cover herself more fully, as she leaned forward to look at him sternly.

"I apologise," said Thor. "I meant no offence."

"Well, good," replied Jane. "Okay then."

Jane heaved a sigh and threw herself back against the leather, where she smiled back at him in turn to signify her acceptance of his apology. He realised that Jane and Erik had taught him much these past few weeks, enough that he gradually saw that patience gained him more than anger ever could, and he saw the wisdom in his father's choice to send him away. Thor felt a draught from somewhere nearby, as he took in his friends' expression, and he saw in them a shared sort of embarrassment, perhaps as Jane said what they otherwise feared to say.

"Is that behaviour normal back home?"

"It is perhaps just as abnormal as here," admitted Sif to Jane. "Fandral, Thor, and I come from the outskirts of Reykjavik. Thor's family have a tradition of smashing glasses during such gatherings, as a sign of celebration. It was strange to me first, as I was much older when I first met Thor's family, but it is a celebration most fun when you are accustomed to it."

"Oh, I get it. Kind of like the Greeks when they smash plates, right?" Jane's smile grew bright. "I guess it must be nice to all share the same culture, same family traditions . . . it can get lonely here sometimes, so far away from home and with so little familiar."

"You are not the only one homesick, Ms Foster, I promise you. There is not a day where I do not long for colder climates and smaller communities, but my loyalty is towards my friends and where Thor goes then so shall we. It is not something I regret. Volstagg moved to these lands long ago, whereas we would not have met Hogun were it not for these trips, and I doubt we would have met you either. It has been a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

Jane gave a smile that only added to her beauty. It was one that made Thor smile in turn, as he thought about how â€" were he still single

â€" he would have enjoyed dating such a woman. He admired her intelligence and passion, as well as how her face would light up upon talking about the sciences she so loved, and how she could easily win the attention of everyone within a room with just a simple word. Thor looked between his friends; Fandral could not take his eyes from Jane, while Hogun swayed slightly to the beat of the music.

"Do you ever just feel like you're going insane, though?" Jane asked Sif. "Last Thanksgiving was probably the worst; it was my first holiday away from home, so I guess I was more homesick than usual anyway, but Erik bought a chicken to celebrate. I was so grateful that he even remembered the holiday and how important it was to Darcy and me, but I was also so homesick for the turkey I knew they'd be having back home. I think I burst into tears."

"Erik sounds like a good man. I admire him for trying to make you feel welcome in this country, even if his attempts were not perfect, and I envy you for having such a kind friend in such a strange land. If your research keeps you here this Christmas, I insist that you spend it with us. Volstagg's wife always makes enough to feed any stray guests."

"That's because our voluptuous friend here eats the extras for supper," teased Fandral. "Every guest you bring is a guest that deprives him of a second or third helping! Still, the more the merrier; I had hoped we would be back home in time for the holidays, though."

"I doubt that Thor would leave Loki at this time," said Hogun.

"Ah, yes, he is quite smitten."

Thor felt all eyes upon him, as the waitress brought over another beer. The leftovers from their meals were swept away, as she piled plates upon plates in an impressive balancing act, and Fandral slipped her what looked like his number written on a napkin. There was a loud noise from outside; it sounded like lightning, which made sense when the sky was black and the windows impossible to see through with the heavy rivulets that ran down them.

Hogun gave a small shiver at the sound, but Thor's eyes turned to the doors. They opened to reveal two familiar faces: Loki and Darcy. It looked as if they had been caught in the rain, as both were soaked to the skin despite their outerwear, and even Loki's leather coat failed to protect him from the elements. The way his hair frizzed with the moisture and wind made Thor smile to himself, but most of all he loved how the wind flushed his boyfriend's skin and made him come alive with colour. They spotted the group quickly and came over.

Only Loki chose to sit down.

He waited with a stern look to Thor, until Thor got the hint and moved over, before he sat down next to the blond and shrugged off his coat. Thor draped an arm over Loki's shoulders, as he pulled him closer and tried to ignore how cold the other felt to the touch, while Darcy excused herself to get some drinks from the bar. He ignored the way his friends looked at him; they were varying in their levels of disapproval, but none had so far dared to say anything rude or untoward about Loki to his face or to Loki's, which he

appreciated.

"So this is who's been ringing you all day," observed Fandral.

Loki rolled his eyes, as he leaned back with arms crossed. He looked to Fandral with an unreadable expression, one that was equal parts anger and curiosity, and he seemed on the verge of holding back on some prank or cold words. It was difficult to say why â€" in these past two months â€" Fandral was so much more on the receiving end of Loki's jokes than most, but it so far served as more than enough reason to keep the two at bay as much as possible.

"On the contrary," said Loki, "that would be his father."

"It would? How would you know that?"

"Quite easily. Odin has been attempting to call me all day, in turn." Loki waved a hand dismissively in the air. "I imagine that there is some scandal or other back home; it does not look good when the sons of two rival companies are in bed together, let alone that it reeks of a _Romeo and Juliet_ tone. I have not the patience to deal with such matters."

"I will call Father back later," said Thor. "He would not call either of us so incessantly unless there was something important with which to discuss, but â€" for now â€" I wish to drink and celebrate! It is our two-month anniversary, Loki! Is that not a wonderful thing?"

"It is certainly something," muttered Loki.

'_Yo, I got the drinks_!'

Darcy reappeared at the table with a large tray. Loki reached out for a glass of white wine, while Jane opted for the red, and the rest of the tray seemed to consist of shots and more beer glasses, which certainly made the rest of the table happy. The way Darcy wore her woollen hat made her seem younger than her years, which probably meant she needed to use her ID to prove she was over eighteen, and her shorter height likely didn't help matters. It also didn't help that she blew small bubbles with her gum where she stood.

Jane rolled her eyes, as she sipped her drink and shared a look with Loki. It was a moment later when Darcy pulled out her phone in an exaggerated manner, before she flipped it open and stared for a long time at the screen, and even made a point of adjusted her glasses â€" mostly for fashion â€" to 'see' the screen better. There was a lot of chatter about the table, let alone the pub in general, but she managed to get everyone's attention when she spoke.

"Look, I have a date with Ian, so can I -?"

"Just leave." Jane laughed. "It's fine, honestly."

"Awesome sauce! I'll see you later."

Darcy gave a mock salute, before she placed the tray down and grabbed a drink. It was a cocktail of dubious ingredients, so that it was layered with various colours and topped with various pieces of fruit, and Thor had a sneaking suspicion that she could perhaps match him in a drinking contest any time. Darcy may have been short and slight,

but she burst with energy and seemed very much the life and soul of any party. Thor smiled warmly.

He watched as Darcy ran around the bar; the other side of the pub was dedicated primarily to the drinkers, as opposed to the restaurant section they still sat within, and he could see her walking over to the pool table where Ian stood watching a few men play. They had an instant chemistry, but he could see Ian's nervousness and insecurity even from so far away. There was no doubt that Darcy would need to coax him out of himself, until he felt comfortable enough in her presence to be himself, and that indeed would take a while.

"So . . . two months, huh?"

Jane smiled as she spoke. He noted the way that Sif smiled and looked her over; it made him regret having arrived late, as he half-suspected some inside jokes or shared information that he had failed to be privy toward, and he wondered just what had been said about him in his absence. Thor looked to Fandral, but all he received for his trouble was a wink that he could not quite decipher, and so he held onto Loki and brought his partner closer to him.

"Aye, two months as of this day," said Thor.

"If we are to spend our time counting the days," added Loki, "I cannot see this lasting as long as you seem to think it will. I will never understand how you manage to forge relationships so quickly; take Jane, for example, who you met barely an hour and decided you would become the best of friends. Your need to please people is almost pathological."

"Friendly fellow, isn't he?" Fandral asked across to Jane. "I thought Thor mad when he said he sought to date the son of his enemy, after knowing him a mere few weeks, but now that I have met Loki and spent time with him -? I know him to be mad."

"If my silver tongue turns to lead, it's more the company I'm forced to keep than any inability to play nicely. Fandral here is neglecting to mention that I have received nothing but passive-aggressive comments and sarcastic quips since dating Thor, most of which seem to fall from the lips of Sif and Hogun. One would think them almost jealous, at least judging by the way I seem to be the constant topic of conversation."

There was a hearty laugh from Volstagg, as he waved over the waitress and quickly placed an order for some more side dishes and various deserts for the group, and "as she left with a long list in hand" he turned to Loki and slid across the bowl of bread. It was a gentle and almost paternal gesture, perhaps borne from the fact he was a father himself and wanted what was best for everyone, and he threw himself back and slapped a hand on Thor's back. It caused Thor to lurch forward and spill some of his drink, while Hogun gave a chuckle.

"It is just playful teasing, I'm sure." Volstagg winked over to them. "You play such pranks and make such insults back, Loki, so you can hardly blame them for their reactions. Come now, we all need to learn to get along. I think this is the longest relationship that Thor has ever had, and I hate to think of the next forty or more years being spent in constant bickering, so why not just eat and smile and drink

with us, eh? It'll be fine, I promise."

"I suppose there is some cause for celebration," admitted Loki. "I have yet to see the gallery do better than at present, while Thor has been commissioned for a mural at the local hospital, and I hear that one Ms Foster is being headhunted for her talents. If I am required to be social, I suppose there is no better time for such socialisation."

Thor's phone began to ring.

He instinctively went for his pocket, as he cursed the embarrassing ring-tone likely set by Loki since he sat at the table, and "as he saw the phone in Loki's hands" he realised that his guess was completely correct. Thor stopped patting himself down; it was a relief to know the phone wasn't quite misplaced, but frustrating to know that Loki could pick his pockets so expertly and even change his phone's settings without him noticing. Thor reached out, but Loki pulled away with a smirk and answered the phone on his behalf.

"Loki Laufeyson speaking," said Loki.

The expression on his face changed subtly; his eyes narrowed and his lips pursed, so that the irritation was plain to see and Thor suspected the caller was no other than Odin, but that only meant that Loki would see the phone call as a challenge on how best to embarrass Thor. He resigned himself to situation and slouched back with beer in hand.

"If that is my father, Loki, I would "

Loki waved a hand dismissively, as he said into the phone: "Thor is currently indisposed, but I am more than happy to take a message. If I may say that -? Oh. Oh, you are quite sure? I " I mean, is she -? Y-yes, I can . . . just give us twenty minutes. Thank you."

Loki hung up the phone and handed it to Thor. There was no hiding that it was bad news; his face was deathly pale and his lips trembled, while his eyes looked unfocussed and he seemed to struggle for breath, and Thor "not knowing how to best calm him" could only watch on out of helpless frustration. It took Loki a long time to break the silence, while he was forced to push away almost violently the beer offered to him from Fandral across the table. When he spoke, his voice was broken and low like a man lost:

"It's my mother. She's in hospital."

9. Chapter 9

Chapter Nine

Frigga looked helpless.

It was difficult to see her in such a state; the hospital bed sat in a large ward filled with other people, all of whom were in varying states of pain and distress, and the walls were so bland and sterile that they made him feel claustrophobic. The curtains around the bed were pulled back, while a window overhead gave out a little light into the otherwise dark room that seemed to have a disturbing lack of

natural light. The stench of disinfectant clung in the air.

Frigga sat upright in a bed at the far corner of the ward, where an elderly woman lay beside her as a neighbour, and Thor " as he looked to that woman " felt a mixture of nausea and relief, as he felt an intense gratitude that Frigga was by no means as in such a severe state. It was clear that Frigga suffered, however, as he leg was set in a cast and there was a nasty bruise about her face. The bruise itself was purple and black in places, as it covered from forehead to just under her eye, and her blue eye was red where it should have been white.

There was a heavy silence in the air.

He noticed that most of the other patients were absent of visitors, likely as it was getting so late into the evening, and Frigga seemed unsure of what to say on sight of them. The smile she wore was beautiful, but fragile and broken. Thor stood absently at the foot of the bed. He saw " from the corner of his eyes " the silhouettes of Odin and Laufey, as they sat beside Frigga and said nothing as they waited for the silence to be broken, but the silence lingered.

"Is Loki with you?" Frigga asked.

Thor saw the hope in her eyes, which made him smile in turn. It was difficult not to feel a stab of resentment, even as his mind spoke of his childish it was to feel such a thing, as he noted that Loki was her priority and not the son she left so long ago. He looked to her, as she sat with her hospital gown clinging to her in a way that would not have flattered most, and realised how lucky he was to still have her in his life. The anger before felt petty now, so much so that he lamented ever having thought their correspondence an effort.

"Loki needed a moment to compose himself," said Thor.

"That boy is as weak as ever," observed Laufey.

"That man had his life turned upside-down." Thor clenched his fists. "Loki is still coming to terms with what you three have done to him, as such it is only natural that he should need space and time to think, but it is that space that has undone him. He feared the worst. He thought Frigga had died without knowing how much he loved her. That is not to be mocked."

Laufey scoffed and gave a smirk. It was clear he felt otherwise; Thor used all his strength not to interrogate the elderly man then and there, as he still had no idea what reason Laufey had to be with them in their time of distress, but he refrained from causing a scene. He caught his father's eye and saw the subtle shake to his head, but he also saw the pale skin and puffy eyes, which showed him that " even after all these years " Odin still loved Frigga.

There soon came a noise from the end of the ward, just next to the nurses' station. Thor turned to see Loki struggling to ask the nurses about his mother, before he turned and caught sight of his family at the far end of the ward, and he seemed blind to the three men around the only person in the world that mattered to him at that moment. Loki effectively ran. The movements were fast and graceful, but there was a clear panic in his features and tears in his eyes, and he came

around the opposite side to Laufey and Odin, as he dropped beside her.

"Mother, I â€" I am so sorry! I'm so â€"

"Rest, my love. I am fine."

Loki laid his forearms upon the side of the bed, as he buried his head against them and began to sob quite openly at the fear of losing his mother. It was heart-breaking to see; Thor had spent the past two months growing to learn Loki's moods, perhaps just as well as Loki had learned to read his, and they had a policy of complete honesty between them, as well as complete support. Thor would often state his anger, while Loki would understand and seek to soothe him and pacify him, and in turn Thor would help with his depression.

There was a great deal of sadness at being unable to ease Loki's pain, but Frigga tried to do her best in his place as she leaned forward to stroke Loki's hair, and the intimacy of the gesture â€" as she smiled down lovingly to him â€" made it clear that he could have asked for no better mother. It soothed Loki somewhat, so that he pulled back and reached out for her hand and held it tightly, and in that moment the world seemed to cease to exist.

"I haven't spoken to you in two months," confessed Loki.

"You needed space, which I understand." Frigga squeezed his hand. "I have known you longer than anyone here, Loki, and I know when you need time to be alone without the pressure of what others may expect from you. I do not begrudge you that time."

"You are too patient! Too kind!" Loki glared through his tears. "Do you remember what the last thing was that I said to you? I accused you of forgetting me, of not truly being my mother, and I rejected your attempts at an explanation. You could have died today believing that I had dismissed you from my life, when the truth is that you shall always be a guiding force in all that I do. I would do nothing for Odin or Laufey, but for you -?"

"Loki, I ask nothing from you other than to know that you are loved. If anything were to happen to me, I would want you to know that I forgive you for everything and simply ask that you strive never to repeat past mistakes, and you are not alone in anything you do. Even should I be gone, you will always have Thor by your side to guide you."

There was another scoff from Laufey. Thor turned to him for the first time, as he tried to observe him fully, and he saw in the man a disturbing resemblance to Loki, so that â€" for a brief moment â€" he feared he saw his lover's future in the visage of his father. Laufey had pulled back his thinning black hair into a low ponytail, while his suit looked ruffled and creased from a long day spent at the hospital, and there were lines upon his face that revealed his age despite his good health and expensive attire. He looked stern, however.

"Why is he here?" Thor asked.

Loki looked over and saw Laufey for the first time. He wiped at his nose and eyes, as he tried to make himself look presentable, but

Frigga only shushed him and continued to stroke at his hair with tenderly touches. The look Laufey shot them both was hard to decipher, but Thor suspected he caught a hint of longing and perhaps even regret. The tension was heavy in the air, so that he began to feel his heart race awkwardly, but Odin thankfully spoke for them.

"Laufey is who saved your mother," said Odin.

"You lie," snapped Loki. "He is a monster."

"Do not slander me, Loki." Odin cast a dark glare. "You know nothing of the situation at hand, nor do you have any right to comment on my character, and I only hope that Thor can see you for what you truly are sooner rather than later. There is darkness in you. I will not deny that I feel great distrust towards your father, but he is innocent in this accident."

"So â€" so what? He â€" he just happened to be in England after all this time, in the exact same place as my mother? You do not know this man like I know him! Why are you even here, Odin Borson? Do you not have anyone else you can neglect or abandon?"

"Loki, Odin has been here with me," said Frigga patiently. "He has been here for some weeks; I would have told you, but we had not been in touch for some time. Laufey came for a business trip on behalf of B  leistr, as B  leistr had much to discuss with Odin, but we had an argument that led to me walking away from the confrontation. I tripped over a chair in the meeting room, but Laufey brought me straight to the hospital."

"A broken leg and nothing more," muttered Laufey.

"I need to stay in overnight, just to be safe."

Loki looked between Frigga and Laufey, as if he were trying to ascertain some deeper truth, but Thor â€" who watched both carefully â€" could detect no lie. He knew that Frigga bore him later in life, which meant she was older than most parents of his generation, and it was not surprising that a bad fall could result in such a bad break. There was a sound from afar as one of the nurses laughed, as he caught sight of an annoyed doctor storming away, and a bedside light flickered from one of the other patients' beds. Loki noticed none of this and asked:

"Overnight? Is there a concussion?"

The smile on Frigga's lips spoke of a great deal of love, but also of a slight tiredness that came from one that wished only to rest, and it must have been tiring to tend to Loki when she was in need of being tended to in turn. Laufey chose that moment to stand, as he pulled on a coat that looked to cost more than Thor earned in a month, before he gestured kindly to his seat and let Thor sidle in next to his father, while Laufey prepared to leave.

"I knocked my head upon the table," said Frigga. "It is a mere precaution."

"You need to be honest with me," continued Loki. "If â€" if he did anything to harm you, we can call the police . . . there is no need

to fear him . . . you forget that I know what he's capable of doing, but I swear that I will avenge any harm done to you."

"If that is all," interrupted Laufey, "I will take my leave."

Odin refused to so much as spare a glance. Thor noticed that Frigga was the only one to thank Laufey for his kindness, while Loki's left hand clenched hard enough upon the bed-sheet that a small tear began to appear, while his eyes were impossibly wide on sight of Laufey. There was a strange tension once again, only this time Thor could almost feel it upon his skin, so that he felt a cold wave wash over him and shuddered at the sensation. The only sound that followed was the soft squeak of Laufey's shoes upon tiled floor.

The elderly man walked away, but Loki's body looked poised to snap. It was anger that Thor rarely saw in Loki, something borne out of sheer hatred and not just the deep depression, and he could not tear his eyes away from the other man. He watched as Loki let his hand slip away from Frigga's, as he stood slowly and regally, and " as Frigga desperately tried to take a hold of him " he batted her away and stepped back from the bed. His eyes watered.

"Excuse me for one moment," whispered Loki.

Loki marched away with a speed that could barely be comprehended, until he was out of sight and following in Laufey's footsteps, and " next to Thor " a curse could be heard from Odin that was rare to hear and filled with frustration. Odin stood in turn, as he squeezed past Thor and came to stand at the foot of the bed, where he gave a deep bow to Frigga and smiled so warmly that Thor thought it strange on his father's face. It was a beautiful expression that spoke of a love that hadn't died, even after all these years, and Frigga smiled back in turn.

"I will see to Loki. Do not worry."

Odin clapped a hand on Thor's shoulder, in a touch both warning and paternal, as he walked away and left Thor alone with Frigga. It was the first time they were alone in decades. There was no way to know what was appropriate to say and what was not, but he knew that this was the woman that bore him and loved him, even if that love lasted a shorter time than it ought, and he was left with mixed feelings at knowing how she could have passed.

"I am glad you are well," said Thor awkwardly.

"I simply hope this accident hasn't inconvenienced you." Frigga gave a sad smile. "I can smell the alcohol, Thor, while Odin said it sounded very much like you were in a bar or club, and I remember you saying this was an anniversary with Loki? I will likely be discharged tomorrow morning, so there was no need to rush at all, I promise you."

"There was every need to rush." Thor paused to collect his thoughts. "I was scared when Loki first told me the news; at first I felt fear for the idea of the mother I could have had, but then I realised I could still have that mother . . . if anything happened to you, though -?"

"We would never be able to reconcile."

Thor gave a low sigh, but kept the smile upon his lips. He listened to the sounds of beeping machines and snores from patients, while the blood pressure cuff on Frigga occasionally let out an obnoxious sound as it tightened, and he wondered how long it would take for his father to return with Loki. The chair creaked when he moved, unable to support the weight that came from a lifetime of building muscles, and he remembered Loki's horror when he insisted on converting a spare room into a home gymnasium. He smiled at the memory.

There came a shout from across the nurses' station, as some emergency or other came to the attention of the staff, and soon the sounds changed as people ran to and fro. It was coming to the end of visiting hours; one of the other patients, an old man with a drip in the crook of his arm, swore loudly and pressed the call button to make a complaint. Thor would soon need to find his father and lover and lead them away, as time was running late.

"Is there anything to reconcile?" Thor asked.

"I would like to think so," admitted Frigga. "I made a mistake. Do not misunderstand me, for it was never a mistake to keep Loki in my life, but I should have made more of an effort to stay also in your life. I did not fight Odin hard enough, for that I apologise."

"It was not your fault that Father lied to me about your 'death'."

"It was my fault I was never there to correct that lie."

"What is done is done," said Thor.

He felt his smile waver, as he tried to forget the pain her absence caused. The truth was that he had a good life, where Odin provided all that he could ever need, but that did not cease the lifetime of questioning that came from wondering about what life would be like with her presence. There was more abrupt noise from further down the hallway. Thor was unaware of the layout of the hospital, but the mixed and open wards already felt strange to him, and so he was forced to listen to the noises in a distracted curiosity. Frigga gave a sigh.

"It sounds like an emergency. That is a shame."

It sounded like chaos from outside. Thor did not know what to expect, but Loki in a state of sheer shock was not one of them. The younger man rounded the corner with slow and lost movements, like one wading through water or one lost in some strange place, and soon Odin came to stand by his side with an arm draped over him. Loki did not shrug him away or curse his touch, but then Odin looked almost as solemn as Loki appeared.

Thor stood up immediately on sight of them, although he motioned for Frigga not to move, as she instinctively tried to go to her son and ex-husband. It took longer than imaginable for Loki to reach them; it felt as if Odin and Loki moved slower than usual, although Thor feared it was his growing panic that caused time to slow, and he felt his mouth run dry and his heart begin to race. Odin eventually led Loki to a seat just next to Frigga, where he practically fell into place and stared absently ahead. Thor knelt beside him and

asked:

"Loki, what has happened?"

Odin gave a low hiss of breath, as he sat opposite them and looked over to the nurses and staff that moved quickly to and fro, before he quickly turned his gaze to Thor. There was something in his expression that was almost warning; it filled Thor with dozens of questions, questions that would possibly not get answered in such a setting, and he wondered just what exactly had happened and what these two men were hiding from him.

"Laufey slipped on the staircase," said Odin. "It is serious."

"He was unconscious," whispered Loki. "Gone."

The news silenced them all.

Thor looked to Loki and saw the pain in his expression, but he also saw the anger that boiled behind those eyes and the hair that fell to cast his face in shadow, and a horrifying suspicion fell over him that made him hate himself at the very thought. He needed to be there for Loki. That his thoughts could turn to anything so dark, so cruel, created a shame unlike any other, one that could potentially ruin their relationship before it had even began, and so he reached out to take Loki's hand. He gave a sigh of relief when Loki squeezed it back.

There were tears in Frigga's eyes, as she felt for her son and experienced his pain with him. It was difficult to imagine how Loki must have felt, for he both longed for Laufey's validation and loathed him with the same breath, and no doubt he must have been conflicted with losing the only father figure he had known, abusive as he had been. Frigga reached out a hand and silently beckoned Loki over to her. He let go of Thor and sat on the edge of the bed.

"Oh, my dear," said Frigga. "Come here."

Frigga hugged him tightly to her. Loki said nothing and shed no tears, although they built behind his eyes and a glower appeared occasionally to mar his expression, and Thor felt his heart race painfully in his chest. It felt too strange that Laufey should fall at that moment, too coincidental, and Odin kept looking to Thor with a deep anger that spoke of some deeper secret still, and Thor struggled to be strong for Loki and for Frigga.

He swallowed back his fears and forced a sympathetic smile.

There was something not right.

End
file.